Exploring the context for professional development in a large distance university

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the significance of distributed working in influencing the needs and relevance of professional development in a large distance university. It describes the particular context and challenges for staff who work at the Open University (UK), and the distinctive ways in which staff work together within that environment. This has direct implications for the opportunities for and success of professional development, whether that is formal provision or whether it takes place informally, on the job.

With a rapidly increasingly pace of change there is a pressing need to keep staff regularly updated with new working practices in learning and teaching. At the same time, the demands of delivering education at scale places specific demands on its staff, who work in ways which may be unfamiliar to traditional campus based institutions.

The picture is of an institution where all staff need to make use of technologies in their working practices as a requirement of the job. The extent to which they embrace these technologies and their attitudes to its adoption varies according to their context and circumstances. The adoption of technologies into the working practices of staff has been a gradual process over the last decade, driven in part by the needs of particular modules, but also by University strategy, and probably for those who work at home by trends in domestic use of technologies.

A wide range of modules and other resources are in place to support professional development, alongside the informal development which takes place in a complex web of working communities. We have illustrated how staff at the OU belong to a large number of working communities, some of them short term, others which may last for several years. Critically, many of these communities consist of staff with varied roles and responsibilities who may be academic, or academic-related, full or part-time who are united in a common goal and may have common needs for development. Staff may commonly belong to several communities at one time, for example they might belong to module teams but also have connections with a particular unit, or to a region or nation, sometimes with conflicting loyalties or perspectives. Finally, it is common for members of these communities to be geographically dispersed, so communication technologies have a central role in supporting and sustaining their effectiveness and viability.

Keywords

Professional development

Distributed working

Online communities

Introduction

The Open University (UK) is Britain's largest university teaching part-time students almost exclusively at a distance. Since it began in 1971, over two million people have studied a module with the OU, learning through the use of module materials, the support of a tutor and increasingly the use of online support and learning delivery.

The Open University has a long and successful history in the business of high quality distance education, using print, software, home experiment kits and audio visual materials, and while online learning was first introduced 20 years ago, the online environment has evolved much more rapidly in the last 10 years both within and outside

the university. The OU's greatest challenge will be to respond quickly to a much more dynamic distance education environment and this inevitably means that professionals working at the university, as well as students taking our modules, need to adjust to new ways of working. Professional development at the OU needs to reflect this dynamism and rapid change in the environment. This paper explains the particular context and challenges for staff who work in this distance university, with implications for the opportunities and success of professional development, whether that is formal provision or whether it takes place informally, on the job.

The Open University (UK): scope, size and scale

Incorporated by Royal Charter, the OU has a mission that declares the university is 'open to people, places, methods and ideas'. The university offers a broad range of curricula, across Arts, Social and Health Sciences, Languages, Science, Technology, Engineering, Computing, Business, Law and Education. A total of 473 undergraduate module modules and 160 postgraduate module modules are presented at least once each year. A module may represent anything between 10 and 60 credit points of study.

Qualifications are constructed from modules and students can study modules in any order they like and over several years if they wish. Consequently, decisions about curriculum, teaching, learning and student support have to take account of considerable variation in expectations across the student body.

In the academic year 2007/2008, approximately 230,000 students were registered with the OU, of which 177,000 were resident in the UK and 53,000 were either registered outside the UK or were students whose qualifications were validated through the OU. Contrary to popular misconceptions, 30% of students (69,000) are under 25 years old although the median average age for students is 32. There are no entry requirements for students and 41% of students (94,300) register with low previous educational qualifications. Students come from diverse backgrounds, with 18% (41,400) who qualify for financial assistance with their fees, meaning they have low income, and 5% (11,500) who opt to declare a disability at registration. This diversity across the student population brings particular challenges to our approaches to module design, tuition and support in terms of maximising accessibility, representing cultural diversity, ensuring global reach and affordability, all of which has consequences for the pastoral support which is needed, the support for use of online technologies and the type and content of professional development which our staff must undertake.

Finally, because we serve distance students, they are located all over the world and may relocate routinely during their studies. Indeed, no undergraduate students study on the main campus or at any of the national or regional offices, so many of our campus based staff do not have regular day-to-day contact with students, unless they are students or Associate Lecturers themselves.

Staff contexts and communities

The size and complexity of the university mean that staff operate in a highly distributed environment which relies heavily on and is mediated by the use of online communication technologies. We describe here their working locations, followed by the roles and responsibilities of the various groups of staff.

The main campus of the university is in Milton Keynes: it sits within its own estate managed grounds and provides the head office and the primary home of faculties, publishing services, a library, centralised student support functions and an Institute of Educational Technology. In addition to faculty, publishing and administrative buildings, the campus includes social facilities, a shop, bank and two lecture theatres that primarily host events for the community of 2500 academic and related staff.

In addition are 10 regional offices across England and the three national offices in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, which provide local support for students and the recruitment and development of Associate Lecturers. Staff have an increasingly significant role in contextualising central initiatives to local needs and circumstances, balancing the tensions of scale and consistency against the demands of local presence. There are also several administrative offices around Europe, providing support to students studying abroad.

There is, therefore, a considerable geographical spread of all types of staff around the UK and Europe, many of whom are attached to one or more offices and where working from home is common practice. Provision of professional development using traditional events or seminars is problematic and expensive to support. Ongoing communication between staff in different locations is a challenge that is being eased through the use of various online technologies. To carry out the university's day to day business use is made of email, video conferencing and a variety of online collaborative tools. Where possible, staff are encouraged to use the same tools as the students, thereby ensuring that staff are aware of the benefits and limitations of online tools when working at a distance.

In order to support the necessary scale of operation while maintaining contact with individual students, the university employs 13,000 staff, over half of whom work part-time.

Staffing 2007/8

1,253 Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Readers and Professors (usually full time posts)
7,982 Associate Lecturers (part time posts)
1,786 Academic Related staff (usually full time post)
1,910 Secretarial, Clerical staff and Technicians (usually full time posts)

Figure 1: Staffing at the Open University (UK)

These four very large groups of staff have significantly different roles and responsibilities, which often differ substantially from those which are familiar to campus based institutions.

Lecturers, senior lecturers, readers and professors are heavily involved in research, scholarship and curriculum design. They will identify qualifications which the OU should offer to students; design those qualifications and design the learning and teaching content within each module that counts towards a qualification. It is not unusual for about half of these staff to work from regional offices or from home, Some full time academic staff are primarily located in the regions as 'Staff Tutors' to oversee AL management and development so they often belong to a number of communities associated with the staff in the geographical area where they work, as well as the Faculty they belong to, although they are not necessarily in regular face-to-face contact with each other.

Associate Lecturers are appointed using part time contracts which run for the life of a module (around seven years), and staff turn-over means that professional development is a major consideration. We know that Associate Lecturers frequently have a variety of other work-related experiences they bring to the job: they might be working full-time in other institutions, or perhaps have a portfolio career across several institutions. It is likely that these varied backgrounds and motivations will influence tutors' needs for staff development in addition to their attitudes to drivers such as accreditation, job satisfaction or the enhanced ability to support students effectively. They are required to teach modules that are designed and prepared by their full time academic colleagues at the OU. Each AL is allocated a tutor group of about 20 students and they are required to support students in a prescribed way. The learning outcomes for each module and the study hours apportioned to that module have already been accounted for in the module design and materials. Associate Lecturers are the primary contact point with the students, and they need to rely extensively on online communities for informal professional contact since they work from home, and may have few or irregular opportunities to meet each other face to face, or indeed to meet the staff who designed the module. The need for Associate Lecturers to keep in touch with one another and the team that developed the module, is critically important to the OU's quality assurance processes because it enables everyone to check and monitor that their approach to tuition is consistent, across very large and dispersed cohorts of students.

Academic-related staff include several professional categories which are particular to distance education, including project managers who manage modules through their design, publishing, delivery and presentation. Professionals available to academic module designers and project managers include: publishing editors, copyright experts, designers, graphic artists, web developers, software developers, IT support staff and logistics managers. This category also includes more conventional professional staff including specialists in student support, finance, marketing, communications, estate management and university administration. Finally, secretarial, clerical and technical staff provide support to the academic and professional staff.

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870

Staff teams: module design and production

Unlike campus based institutions, it is very rarely the case that one academic will identify a need for a module within a qualification and then design that module and deliver it to students. An Open University module can take up to two years to design and publish although the time scales vary considerably according to the availability of staff time and the need for up-datedness within a module. Although the design and production time is considerable, the module may be presented over several years, with regular updates once it is in place.

Curriculum design is a complex process involving large governance structures that are designed to make sure that the curriculum is required, manageable, affordable and deliverable at scale. Since anywhere from 10,000 to 50 students register for one module at the same time, and given that all module materials (whether online, on paper or in another format) are published, quality assurance sits at the heart of all decision making. Consistency of learning and teaching *at scale* is a major concern.

To make sure that all modules meet pre-set quality criteria, as well as being manageable and scalable, every new curriculum idea is considered by an appointed expert academic committee in that subject area. If the idea for a new module is supported, then a 'module team' is allocated to develop that idea into a module which can be published and delivered at a distance.

The module team will be led by an academic champion, who will be supported typically by 2 to 10 other academics in the field who will contribute to the design and creation of material for that module. The size of the team will usually depend on the size of the module and the amount of time each academic has available to work on the project.

The academic team work together to establish the learning outcomes for the module, the assessment strategy and the overall learning and teaching design in other words, how best to deliver the learning outcomes at a distance, given an array of publishing options including print, audio visual and an increasing number of online interactive options. Given that the development team may not necessarily be involved in the delivery of the module to students, a representative AL and/or a Staff Tutor (regionally based line manager for Associate Lecturers) may also form part of the academic team to ensure that there is a connection between those designing the module and those delivering it. It is also common practice to appoint several critical readers and developmental testers selected from AL staff, to review material that is produced during the development of a module.

Since all OU modules are published for distance delivery, the module design and production constitutes a production project that is managed by project managers. The allocated 'Course Manager' will work with an academic 'Course Team Chair' and academic team to ensure that all materials are produced on schedule and to budget. The course manager will ensure that appropriate QA measures are applied, including the appointment of a senior academic External Assessor from another university to check standards. Since all materials are published to students, it is normal practice to have a publishing editor, designer, artist, software developer and other publishing specialists assigned to a module that is in development. While the Course Team Chair has overall responsibility for the module, the Course Manager will usually manage the business of production in close consultation with the Course Team Chair.

This style of curriculum design and production is in marked contrast with conventional universities, reflecting the need to deliver materials at scale as an enterprise that requires several complementary professional groups of staff.

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871

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Staff teams: tuition and support

Once a module has been produced, it is supported by another team of staff. For example a module with 1000 students registered will be supported by:

- A Course Team Chair – an academic leader who has overall responsibility for the quality of the presentation and its grading. The leader will have a team that includes:
  - 2 academics to prepare assessment questions and provide support to the Leader and Associate Lecturers. One of these may be a representative Staff Tutor or a representative AL.
  - A Course Manager –academic related
  - A publishing manager and publishing experts required to process any new material and content specific to that presentation

- 50 Associate Lecturers – who have direct contact with students and who will be managed by regionally based Staff Tutors and represented by one Staff Tutor on the Course Team Chair's team.
- Student administrative and IT support services

This team will work together for the life of the module, which may be up to seven years, although the highly distributed working patterns of staff mean that regular contact is heavily dependent on effective online communication. This is particularly an issue during assignment marking and moderation, where interpretation of the question and marking guidelines can be an issue.

Drivers for changing working practices

The OU's Learning and Teaching Strategy (2009 to 2012) is a major driver for change in working practices across the university. It states:

> This strategy signals an increasing use of technology to support learning and teaching, and seek to build on our existing competitive advantage. Technology has a fundamental role to play in university education in relation to enhancing the learning experience, transforming our business and pedagogic practices, improving efficiency for staff and students. It also provides the capacity to reach more people in more parts of the world.

The university has developed online learning systems to support module teams in their development of modules, Associate Lecturers and students in their collaborative and interactive activities. The learning systems include facilities to:

- Deliver content interactively
- Enable collaborative activities, both synchronously and asynchronously
- Enable online assessment, both formative and summative
- Store resources collected by students or staff on behalf of students
- Help students manage their own module related materials

For enquirers and students, a wide variety of websites now provide advice on choosing appropriate modules with a view to achieving a specific qualification. The website provides links to all aspects of study from career development or study skills to advice for families and friends. Online pages of advice are linked to options to telephone for assistance to meet specific needs.

For tuition the University makes large scale use of online forums. To support module related materials and encourage an enquiring approach, an extensive library with 14,000 electronic journal titles and 7500 electronic books are available to all staff and students. Many modules now embed access to library resources with teaching materials. An electronic assignment submission system has been introduced, which means that most assignments are submitted, marked and returned through a central computer, regardless of where students or tutors are based. The system facilitates plagiarism detection: an issue which is of increasing concern with the

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872

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ready access to resources in today's networked world. A quality assurance system has been introduced, which collates regular feedback from students on their tutors' performance.

In the last five years, the University has moved to an integrated learning system using a single interface which makes available contextually relevant resources, several collaborative tools and tools that facilitate online assessment and/or assignment submission. It is possible to arrange online tutorials delivering voice to the student's machine, together with shared access to visual aids or links to websites. Video will be introduced into that synchronous mix for tutorials shortly. All students and staff have a personalised home page, with links to university news, an appropriate range of university wide resources, as well as to their email and collaborative community building tools. These developments mean that all OU students and staff are required to have access to the internet, wherever they live.

Technologically, the rate of change in online environments is extremely fast and so the OU is to focus on learning systems that are required to learn and teach rather than focusing on products that are available at any one point in time. Currently, a combination of Moodle, Elluminate and some bespoke OU tools make up the OU's learning systems. The OU is investigating how several other technologies might be applied more meaningfully to learning and teaching, including Virtual Worlds, Mobile technologies and cloud computing possibilities.

With regard to learning and teaching using new tools, several units in the university have a remit to investigate their use and application. In combination, these groups consider both blue sky thinking and practical applications. The groups are not entirely separate: staff are encouraged to engage with each unit and each unit is encouraged to engage staff in its business.

Knowledge Media Institute (KMI)– a research based institute focusing on the convergence of cognitive and learning sciences, artificial intelligence and semantic technologies KMI developed the first scalable synchronous collaborative tool that was used at the OU: Lyceum.

Institute of Educational Technology (IET) – a centre for teaching, research and development of educational technologies in the service of effective learning. Academic experts from IET often advise academic teams in the appropriate application of various technologies to the curriculum design which is under consideration. IET also provide invaluable evidence back to faculties and teams about the effectiveness of their qualification and module designs, based on student survey information and effectiveness evaluations carried out by IET on behalf of faculties.

Learning Innovation Office (LIO) a small office that co-ordinates the activities of larger units with a view to ensuring that the university's learning systems are fit for purpose and can be developed according to the needs of staff and students alike. LIO will also review horizon scan with a view to assessing whether new but stable technologies are emerging that should be investigated by the OU.

Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) that are partly funded by a UK government initiative. The centres provide an environment outside of the normal working practices where academic staff can experiment with new technologies and assess their value within the context of their own subject areas. This scholarship activity has contributed greatly to the prepared-ness of the OU to move its teaching and learning online.

The picture is of an institution where all staff need to make use of technologies in their working practices as a requirement of the job. The extent to which they embrace these technologies and their attitudes to its adoption varies according to their context and circumstances. The adoption of technologies into the working practices of staff has been a gradual process over the last decade, driven in part by the needs of particular modules, but also by University strategy, and probably for those who work at home by trends in home use of ICT by the population at large. In the case of our part-time staff, this progress has been charted through a longitudinal interval study of attitudes towards and use of ICT over a 10 year period since 1995, to which 10,000 Associate Lecturers have contributed (Kirkup & Kirkwood, 2005). The surveys explored changing concerns as the technologies and activities for which they were used developed over time. Arguably innovators and early adopters are more accepting of increases in workload and may even relish learning new skills to master the

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873

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innovation. In contrast, later adopters have a different attitude to the innovation, and may be more critical of its value and application, in comparison with existing tools in the system.

Professional development initiatives

In an environment where the student population is hugely diverse, where technology enhanced learning is evolving rapidly and where competition with other HE providers is expanding on a global scale, the university is acutely aware of the need to ensure that its staff are equipped to respond quickly and effectively. This takes place in two ways: through informal communities and through more formal professional development initiatives. Indeed Knight et al (2006) stress the significance of informal learning in professional development, since much of what is eventually translated into practice is acquired from conversations with colleagues, or innovation in response to a specific need or demand which is situated within working practices. We have illustrated how staff at the OU belong to a large number of working communities, some of them short term, others which may last for several years. Critically, many of these communities consist of staff with varied roles and responsibilities who may be academic, or academic-related, full or part-time who are united in a common goal and may have common needs for development. Staff may belong to several communities at one time, for example they might belong to module teams but also have connections with a particular unit, or to a region or nation, sometimes with conflicting loyalties or perspectives. Since these communities are often geographically dispersed communication technologies have a central role in supporting and sustaining their effectiveness and viability.

While module development teams provide the meeting place for several types of staff working together on a project, academic departments provide the home for scholarship, research and curriculum strategies. Departmental heads have a responsibility to ensure that central academics are aware of strategic objectives and develop modules using the latest technologies where it is appropriate to do so. Contextual academic debate about teaching and learning best practices takes place within departments. Heads of Department are kept up to date with news from each of the units investigating and evaluating technological changes referred to above.

In addition to the professional development that takes place informally in these communities, the OU supports more formal professional development through a variety of routes. The university is developing a professional development road map that is designed for all academic staff, specifically supporting academics in their learning and teaching design. The road map includes information about the various services and products available to staff who need to engage in specific development needs. This roadmap is becoming increasingly important as the variety of development needs expands in line with the expansion in learning and teaching options in an online environment. Formal professional development opportunities take place in a variety of ways including university induction courses, printed and webbased resources, short courses such as VLE-Choices, work shadowing and staff placements. In addition members of staff may take any of the university's accredited courses under a fee waiver scheme.

The responsibility for professional development for Associate Lecturers is shared among a variety of units within the University. Faculties provide induction into module concepts and approaches to learner support through an initial compulsory module briefing, which is normally conducted in a day's workshop. For ongoing professional development, the University has a range of distance learning materials, which are both paper and web based. Opportunities for more generic professional development, and some Faculty associated briefings are provided through optional, face to face seminars and workshops: such ongoing professional development is commonly the responsibility of locally situated staff.

In terms of induction into the use of new tools, the university provides a range of web-based and paper resources to provide guidance and to direct tutors to further help and assistance. Finally for a pedagogic introduction to supporting student groups online the module Tutor Moderators is widely in use throughout the university for both induction at the start of new modules and for continual professional development. These central initiatives are supplemented by a range of local hands-on workshops, surgeries and telephone support for Associate Lecturers who are in difficulty.

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874

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In summary, this paper has illustrated the significance of working contexts in influencing the needs and relevance of professional development in a large distance university. A wide range of modules and other resources are in place to support this, alongside the informal development which takes place in a complex web of working communities. Further papers in this symposium build on these notions of context and community in describing three of these initiatives, which illustrate the roles of peer support and experiential learning in the successful adoption and embedding of innovation.

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875