

## **Teacher- Learner Interactions in Distance Education: A Case of Two Malaysian Universities**

**Hisham DZAKIRA**  
**School of Scientific Thinking & Education Universiti Utara,**  
**MALAYSIA**

**Rozhan MohammedIDRUS**  
**School of Distance Education Universiti Sains,**  
**MALAYSIA**

### **Introduction**

Distance learning is not new in Malaysia. It is a concept that is made up of two words: distance and learning, and entails the state of being apart, separation or remoteness in relationship between DLs with distance teachers (DTs), other DLs and the course content. Debates continue, and there is still no consensus between DE researchers and enthusiasts as far as the term distance learning is concerned. The field is continuously changing and evolving.

As DE researchers and educators, we believe distance learning means a learning method that takes place over a distance. This implies that the DTs and the DLs are separated by distance, and that the support for learning can be achieved and enhanced by learning interactivity between the learners, the DTs, and the course content. This can be attained by means of the written word, minimum face to face (f2f) meetings, all of which can be supported by the use of media and technology.

Today, DE calls upon an impressive range of technologies to enable DTs and DLs who are separated by distance to communicate with each other in real time (synchronous) and delayed time (asynchronous) which means distance learners (DLs) can access education and learning opportunities at a time, place, and pace to suit their individual lifestyles, learning preferences and personal developments plans. Such separation according to (Idrus & Lateh,2000) give rise to "an impressive and innovative array of media mix resulting in the application of technology in education"(p.197). Such development offers a radical new direction for DE enthusiasts, teachers and learners alike. They incorporate flexible and open learning methods as well as modified and specially created learning resources.

DE providers need to understand that its educational products and services are to service their DLs and provide an encouraging educational experience. The main task of any DE provider is to design and offer distance educational experience that encourages learning. In developing and delivering DE courses, we need to consider many factors to overcome different barriers and factors to achieve effective and efficient implementation of distance education courses and programs. One factor that affects distance learners' (DLs) success in distance education (DE) is the amount of interaction that occurs in distance learning between DTs and DLs.

Interaction plays an important role in distance learning, and it does affect success in DE. Moore (1989) noted that to be successful in delivering DE courses, DTs must allow DLs to interact with minimal intervention; engage the learners in regular assignments in order to monitor progress; provide specialize attention to the learners regularly; provide specialized attention to learners with low levels of self-directedness; and help the DLs become more self directed .

Moore's insertion is an important one, particularly because DLs often feel isolated and apprehensive (Dzakiria & Rob, 2002; Hara & Kling, 1999). Among other reasons, this may be, due to lack of interactions between DTs with DLs in distance learning. Parallel to this, Tobin (2001) noted that DLs and DTs must have good relationship skills, which can also be interpreted as having good, positive and enriching interactions. Poor interaction skills often manifest into conflict, problems, frustrations and failure for both learners and DTs. Tobin further noted that DLs who fail to engage or have effective interaction with other DLs and DTs are more likely to fail than those DLs who interact well.

We have to realize that although many DE courses and teachers take advantage of different technology ( i.e email, threaded discussion, chat, etc.) to interact, DLs often have limited f2f opportunity (Perrin & Mayhew, 2000). DLs further often fail to establish strong and sustainable relationships with other DLs and teachers. Perrin and Mayhew noted that DE might not be able to create the amount of interaction associated with f2f courses. Miller and Webster (1997), however found that DTs can provide DLs with similar amounts of interactions as they do on campus students.

However, little is known, about efforts to develop sustainable relationships and interactions within a DE program. In addition, little is also known about the role of learning support-an essential component to enhance interaction in distance learning (Rashid et.al,1993). Murphy (1997) noted that the instructional effectiveness of DE is comparable to that delivered on campus. For DE programs to be successful they must provide "for appropriate and sufficient synchronous and asynchronous interaction between faculty and students" (Murphy,1997,p.8). The question is how can this be done?, and what measures or actions should be implemented?

## Paper Background

This paper presents DLs perspective and experience on distance learning by looking at learning interactions between DTs and DLs at two institutions. This paper first reports on the findings of a qualitative research on a small group of DLs as they progress through their courses at UUM. 12 research respondents were interviewed as part of a close case study of their distance learning careers over a period of time at UUM.

The preliminary findings provide evident that the learning support services provided by UUM as a DE provider was not fully facilitating learning interactions for DLs at the institution. Such evident, call this paper to look at interaction, the use of technology and learning support in distance learning. These emerging issues arose from discussions with the research respondents, rather than being preordained by the research design or derived directly from our own initial interest as distance educators and researchers. The analysis and findings of the UUM study is then compared to the case of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) based on what has been published in the literature. A rigorous analysis and understanding of support services provided by USM to her DLs are made to further analyse and understand distance learning at UUM.

## Distance Education at Universiti Sains Malaysia & Universiti Utara Malaysia

Extending access to higher education (HE) is one of the greater challenges facing many countries. In Malaysia, as well as in many other countries, education is highly valued and lots of effort are made to maintain, sustain and continuously improve education; and they want new programs to be created and instituted.

For many, access to HE is especially critical. DE is one of the most cost effective ways of democratizing education and giving access to life long learning. In its basic form, the 1st generation of DE (the correspondence Model ) was introduced in 1971 when USM established its Centre for Off–Campus Studies. In 1994, the Centre for Off–Campus

Studies at the university was renamed as the Center for Distance Education. The Center for Distance Education was upgraded in 1998 to School of Distance Education. From 1971 to 1989, USM was the only local university to offer courses through distance learning.

In the period of 1993 – 2000, there was a significant increase in the number of institutions that offer DE in Malaysia as shown in Appendix 1.

This came about as a result of the new policy of the Ministry of Education that encourages the introduction of distance education in Malaysian Universities. The following table summarizes basic information of the two institution as DE providers and institutions:

Universiti Sains Malaysia	Universiti Utara Malaysia																		
<p>1. USM is a dual mode institution. Its DE courses and programs are administered, planned and implemented by the School of Distance Education, USM, and supported by other academics and staffs.</p> <p>2. DE began in 1973. Since then different programs have been offered:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>a. B Soc.Sc. (Hons)</td> <td>1973</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b. B.Sc. (Hons)</td> <td>1978</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c. Foundation Science</td> <td>1988</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d. Continuing Education</td> <td>1994</td> </tr> <tr> <td>e. B Eng. (Hons)</td> <td>1995</td> </tr> <tr> <td>f. B Ed. (Hons)</td> <td>1997</td> </tr> <tr> <td>g. B Mgmt. (Hons)</td> <td>1997</td> </tr> </table> <p>3. The delivery system has evolved from basic correspondence education packages to supported distance education approach. Since 1988 IT has played a major role supporting the print materials beside 24 contact at the 20 Regional Centres and mandatory intensive course for 2-4 weeks at the main campus and branch campus. Audio teleconferencing was introduced in 1988, and was upgraded to audio graphic teleconferencing in 1991. The full-motion video conferencing was integrated into the system in 1995, virtual library was launched in 1997, and on-line education was launched in 1999.</p> <p>4. The infrastructure that USM currently have, enables the School to offer USM distance learning programme to the neighbouring countries.</p> <p>5. Develop Off-campus Academic Program (OCAP) to help support the heterogeneous needs of USM distance learners.</p> <p>6. USM is the leading higher learning institution in Malaysia offering DE and has heavily integrated IT in its delivery system. It is capable and ready to become a hub in on-line education and supported distance education in South East Asia.</p> <p>7. With the continuous demand for HE, DE programs and courses at USM will only expand. More programs and courses will be developed in the future.</p>	a. B Soc.Sc. (Hons)	1973	b. B.Sc. (Hons)	1978	c. Foundation Science	1988	d. Continuing Education	1994	e. B Eng. (Hons)	1995	f. B Ed. (Hons)	1997	g. B Mgmt. (Hons)	1997	<p>1. UUM is also a dual mode institution. Its DE courses and programs are administered by DE Unit at The Center for Professional and Continuing Education (PACE), UUM and supported by different schools and academics.</p> <p>2. Started offering DE courses and Programs in 1998, offering:</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>a. B.B.A. (Hons)</td> <td>1998</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b. B.P.A. (Hons)</td> <td>1998</td> </tr> </table> <p>3. In general, UUM was established for the pursuit and development of management based education. In achieving this objective, various academic program are focused on such disciplines as management, accounting, human resource management, entrepreneurship and education which have been offered today.</p> <p>4. Unlike USM, DE at UUM do not adopt a single, centrally determined educational strategy or employ a single system of web-based or online learning. Instead, at UUM, DTs have the autonomy to decide when, and for what course, ICT (use of Internet, on-line, CD-Rom, etc.) should or should not be incorporated in the teaching and learning process. This means that the curriculum and instructional system at UUM remain relatively uncentralised and unstandardised, and individual teacher are able to exercise a degree of judgment in how best to teach their courses. Learning modules remain as the primary learning tool or package received by all DLs. Nevertheless, the use of ICT is central to the process of teaching and learning due to higher education policy adopted towards ICT by Malaysia Ministry of Education.</p> <p>5. DLs and campus based students at UUM are seen as the same and receive homogeneous treatment and support from the institution.</p> <p>6. UUM is still a fairly new DE provider, and is progressing to expand its capabilities. Like USM, UUM DE courses and programs cannot isolate itself from integrating IT into its delivery, courses and programs.</p> <p>7. Similarly, with the continuous demand for HE, UUM too will move towards expanding and developing more DE programs and courses.</p>	a. B.B.A. (Hons)	1998	b. B.P.A. (Hons)	1998
a. B Soc.Sc. (Hons)	1973																		
b. B.Sc. (Hons)	1978																		
c. Foundation Science	1988																		
d. Continuing Education	1994																		
e. B Eng. (Hons)	1995																		
f. B Ed. (Hons)	1997																		
g. B Mgmt. (Hons)	1997																		
a. B.B.A. (Hons)	1998																		
b. B.P.A. (Hons)	1998																		

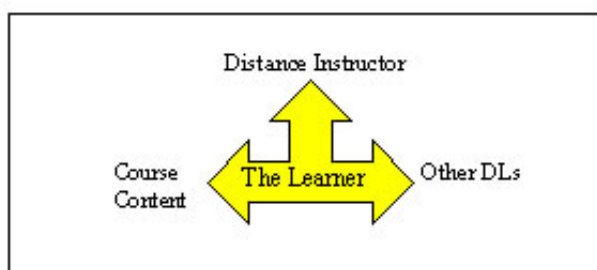
### Changing Educational Environment-A Reflection

Many DLs at USM and UUM alike, perhaps for the first time, are now "faced with a new learning environment. They are expected to have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self direction and self management of learning" (McLoughlin and Marshall, 2000:1). It can be argued that these adult DLs should already have these attributes. However, this generalization does not apply to all DLs at USM and UUM and may not be generalize to all DLs. Every learner, every institution, every curriculum is unique and each exhibit different strengths and weaknesses. Malaysian DLs who have journeyed through 12 years of primary and secondary education may not have an appropriate educational concept of learning for DE. It could be very teacher centered,

and their learning is characterized by dependency on instructors as knowledge providers. Their transition into becoming DLs is not an easy task (Saw et.al., 1999). Their diversity in age, educational background, working experience only magnifies the fact that each learner could be similar or vastly different from other distance learners. A learner who has left the educational setting for many years may feel incompetent and lacking in the learning skills needed to compete with other learners.

The fact remains, DLs are heterogeneous and that each learner faces different circumstances and problems in distance learning. The learning process is more complex than the conventional f2f setting. The reason being, the obstacles encountered by DLs may be different from one distance learner to another with varying degrees of complexity. Being a product of 'teacher-centered paradigm', a common problem experienced by Malaysia DLs is a feeling of isolation (Dzakiria & Walker, 2002) which makes the possibility of a trusting relationship between the DLs with the DTs, and the DLs with other learners so much a difficult one. The desperation of engaging in 'conversation' or interacting between what we called the distance learning triangle as shown below is challenging and can be a source of frustration.

**Diagram 1 The interactive learning triangle of Distance Learning**



The UUM research respondents' frustration and desperation was constantly evident in the research data. Contrary to the assumption of many ODE institutions, that "it is a mistake to assume that physical distance means loss of intimacy in interaction". 'Loss of intimacy in interaction' particularly learning interaction, was strongly felt by the DLs, as is evident in the DLs discourse. They felt that they needed continuous human contact-the presence of a teacher figure to guide their learning. Unfortunately, the meaning of such frustrations is not well understood by many UUM DTs possibly due to the fact that a majority of UUM DTs are "products" of a f2f institution themselves, as such:

- they do not have much distance training and experience as far as developing distance course material is concerned when DE was launched at the institution.
- they may be subject specialists, but with very little or no experience in DE
- they have not experienced the frustration that a distance learner does.
- they may not understand what is involved for the student in being deprived of f2f interaction with their lecturers.

The consequence is that the DTs and tutors have very little sympathy with the learners. They don't understand the degree of difficulties that DLs may have in pursuing the distance course.

In light of the use of technology in today's distance learning environment, its success depends on many different variables. Idrus and Lateh (2000) for example state that it is the task of DTs to develop and incorporate computer technology into a course where a great deal of attention is in the designing of teaching-learning materials suitable for distance learners. This has implication for learning, and its capability to support human interaction unbounded by the restraints of time and space is important (Anderson,1994 in Idrus and Lateh,2002). Equally important, success is also dependent on the DLs skills, and accessibility to use the facilities, and the DTs role in supporting the learning process. In

the study that Idrus and Lateh (2000) conducted to study the perception of students at USM on online courses, it was found that the learners prioritize accessing content and presentation format (totalling more than 60%) more than interactivity (1%) as a preferences in characteristics of online DE. Such finding is an interesting one. For one, it reveals that interaction may not be much of an issue at USM, and the institution must be doing an effective job at providing optimal learning interactions within the context of DE. Such finding can be an important one to an institution like UUM where a lot more attention needs to be done in providing an effective teacher-learner interaction.

### **The Role of Learning Support in Enhancing Interactions in DE**

Distance learning requires the adoption of a new teaching and learning paradigm. As ODE is still fairly 'young' in Malaysia as compared to DE in countries like UK, Australia and Canada, this process is incomplete. For instance, at UUM, DE strategies and delivery modes were perceived by some DLs as not adapted to meet the needs of the larger intakes of learners and the diversity of distance learners that are often to be found in ODE programmes. This raises the issue of learning support in distance learning.

One can probably argue that student support and learning support could be used interchangeable. Student support as reported in many sources breaks down to two components comprising of academic support and non academic support with an objective to help learners learn successfully (Gibson, 1998; Simpson, 1992, 2002). Learning support on the other hand is more learning specific. It refers to support systems intended to enhance and improve learning. The principal objective of learning support is to produce distance learners who are able to progress through their programmes learning successfully, able to be independent learners who have good learning skills and strategies, and able to interact effectively with DTs, tutors, learning materials and other learners at any time. Education after all, is not simply the acquisition of facts or knowledge, but their synthesis and creative and unique ways of putting together information about the world. This call for greater attention to the issue of learning interaction and its role in distance learning and the learning support needed (Rashid et.al,1993).

As important as this may sound, it is important not to see student learning support as the sole source of help for DLs to sustain interactions. However good they are, support systems can never be entirely successful. The problem has to be addressed by DTs. If the university is asking the learners to engage in quite new ways of learning, then it seems logical to require DTs to engage in new ways of teaching. If DLs are required to rethink their implicit understanding of what learning is, then DTs must rethink their views about what teaching is. If the practice of the learner is to change, then DTs need to understand what is involved for learners in making this change and must themselves account for this in their reassessment of teaching.

This is to suggest the need for a major project; the reassessment and reengineering of the educational process by both DLs and DTs and, indeed, by the university as a whole. This is not simply to introduce new technologies of communication but to 're-understand' the process of education. A major paradigm shift in DE is that teaching should focus on the learner-'learner centered', and not the opposite. In general, a learner centered learning should be considered when the following features existed:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| a) diversity of students;  | c) responsibility-DTs and DLs role in learning;                                 |
| b) relationships-the relationships and interactions between teacher-learner and learner-learner; | d.) the relevance of course material-DLs choices in course content and process. |

Being heterogeneous group of learners, distance learning approaches should be characterised by the learner becoming central to the process of learning. Though, there have been numerous debates on what student centered learning entails, but essentially, the DLs takes responsibility for his or her own learning and the DTs becomes a resource, a facilitator in the process. DLs should be able to learn at their own pace, and in a manner which they feel comfortable with including the place, and the style of learning they feel most comfortable with.

### Understanding the Importance of Interactions in Teaching and Learning

Interaction seems to be treated as a quantitative measure rather than as an educational quality. The concept is still educationally vague, and detailed research is needed to discover what meaning interaction has for learners and teachers.

In teaching and learning, the concept of interaction is closely related to that of the 'active learner' or one who responds to the teaching. The key issue in discussions about interaction, however, is whether and how it enhances learning. Simpson and Galbo (1986) writing about classroom learning, oppose the view that interaction is merely a factor in enhancing learning, an external force that improves the instructional process. They propose that interaction is more than an enhancing agent; it is central to the learning process. Mason (1994) reports that there is much theoretical support for the importance of interaction in learning. She mentions that interaction benefit learners at the affective level leading to increased motivation and interest in the subject. In training contexts, there is evidence that interaction helps to increase the speed of assimilation and the length and degree of retention of information. Referring to particular forms of teacher-student interaction, she adds that 'opportunities for learners to express their own points of view, explain the issues in their own words and formulate opposing or different arguments, have always been related to deep-level learning and the development of critical thinking (Mason,1994,p.26).

Learners, should 'do something with the learning material-they may need to demonstrate...that they have understood' (Bates,1991). Because interaction between students is thought to enhance learning, teachers and designers want to provide opportunities for it too.

### Interaction in Open and Distance Education

The following is a detail description of the four important categories or components of interaction which play an important role in today's distance learning. Each component is distinct and has implications to the teaching and learning of DE courses.

Table 1: Four Different Components of Interactions

Type of Interactions	Interaction Refers to:
<i>learner-content interaction</i>	DLs involvement with course materials as they construct their own knowledge by accommodating new materials or information into their learning and understanding.
<i>learner-learner interaction,</i>	one to one interchanges between DLs, as well as communication within groups of other DLs for group work, clarification, feedback and support.
<i>learner-teacher interaction</i>	communication between learners and instructors for the purpose of generating and maintaining interest; presenting, clarifying or elaborating information, supporting learning, or providing feedback, evaluation, and encouragement.
<i>Learner-Interface</i>	an attribution of a media or delivery system like, Internet, email, etc. Technology supported learning environments through the online databases, journals, and learning activities such as independent inquiry, research, writing and browsing can facilitate interactions. <i>One to one</i> interaction that occurs between an instructor and a learner, or two learners, can be accommodated through email or one-one online chats. <i>One to many</i> communication can be supported through <i>list-serves, bulletin boards, and online chats</i> . Video-conferencing offers additional opportunities for one-to-one and one-to-many interchanges.

The different components of interaction shown in table 2 identify the relationships that can occur between different components of interactions in today's DE environment. One in particular that this paper likes to highlight is the fourth interaction. Hillman (1994) argue that discussions of interactions should take into account the learner-technology interaction, which they call the 'learner-interface interaction'. Technologies can serve as bridges for interaction. When interaction occurs through a medium, the learner has to deal with the medium as well as the technology. The design of these mediating technologies becomes important.

The 4 types of interactions that we have discussed so far define the relationships that can occur between different components in a distance learning environment. To what extent are these interactions similar? How does the media/technology component support or deter other interactions? According to Moore (1989), the learner-content interaction is intellectual, between the learner and the subject of study. But the main objective of learner-learner and DLs-DTs interactions is surely to interact with the content or the subject of study. The ultimate aim of these two types of interaction is to facilitate a learner-content interaction.

DLs enjoy distance learning flexibility in terms of place and time of study. However, the degree of flexibility the DLs able to enjoy depends on the availability of the media and learner" access, past experience, and preparedness and other variables that need investigation. If the ultimate objective is to facilitate learner-content interaction, clearly there must be an equation that leads to the ultimate objective. This equation still lacks formulation and it requires an in-depth understanding.

What matters is the quality of interaction made possible by the technology. Livengood (1987,p.28) points out that this quality of interaction is not related to the number of times the learners actually use the computer or surfing the internet. Such physical operations despite being performed at the interface between learner and machine are not learning interactions. Rather, they enable users to interact with the technology and the information structured in it. Alone, they cannot improve learning and will not provide the interactions needed to enhance learning.

Livengood (1987,p.29) goes on to suggest that designing an interactive instructional program must begin with an analysis of the learner, and the learner must be given some control over the pace and sequence of the instruction. Ideally interactive teaching should be adapted to the learner's level of knowledge, pace and method of learning. Borsook and Higginbotham-Wheat (1991,pp.12-13) add that an interactive system should provide immediate responses and feedback to learners' inputs. It should allow them to access information in any sequence.

Technology has the potential to facilitate effective learning not easily replicated by other learning environments. Many of the benefits are intrinsic to interactivity and it is important to understand that it is the educational processes that provide the benefit, not the tools themselves (McArthur & Lewis,1997). It is well established in higher education that a deeper approach to learning is encouraged through active participation in an appropriate contexts (Biggs, 1987). The actively involved learner is generally more effectively engaged in learning activities than the passive learner and is expected to think critically, creatively, reflectively, independent and to be self-directed.

While opportunities exist for educators to enhance learning and interaction in their programs by utilizing technology in DE, Hara and Kling (1999) caution that technology too has its limitations. Their research has revealed the potential of technology delivery frustrate learners. Frustration interferes with pursuing goals (Reber, 1985); it demotivates the learners, and detracts them from learning. Eventually frustration can deter learners from using technology for learning. There are many factors that could lead to

frustrations in using technology in learning. For example, Stratfold, (1998) reports that frustration can occur when DLs fall behind and they may be overwhelmed with messages when re-engaging. Slow and delayed input, and lack of non-verbal cues may also lead to frustration and/or hostility. Frustration can also be caused by lack of sensitivity to the needs of learners, which may not have been taken into account in the rush to embrace the new technology (Salmon, 2000a). Insensitivity to learners' diversity can be a block to learning. Contrasting personality types require different teaching strategies. Some prefer to learn in an independent situation and others prefer a more collaborative style. Content is an important factor and courses in science may need different approaches to those in the arts and humanities. Diversity in learning approaches, educational background, working experience and exposures to technology all need to be considered.

### **UUM DLs Perspectives**

Given the context of DE in Malaysia, and the extent to which technology is used in today's DE, understanding the DLs, and how they cope with 'changes' in distance learning is an ongoing research ambition for us to seek understanding and research. The common feeling of isolation and frustrations among learners pertaining to learning at a distance at UUM for example, have propelled us to learn more about Malaysian DLs and understanding their perspective and experience in distance learning.

In relation to interaction within the IT environment, the respondents agreed that distance learning requires continuous interactions between DLs with the course content, instructors and fellow learners. Technology according to the respondents is central to support these interactions, however as pointed by R7, to initiate and have effective and sustained interactions using the computer is a learning barrier by itself:

Today's learning environment is so change and different. It's all about technology and I know technology plays an important part in today's education...even my standard 3 son knows a great deal about what and how to do things with a computer...but I am not part of the new generation of learners who knows it all. When I first enrolled in DE...I was stunned not knowing what to do, how to do things, how to study and coming to terms that I have to use the computer, and the Internet for my study and communication was initially a scary one at least for me

When asked to describe the DTs-learners relationship and consider whether sufficient academic support was received, several issues related to learning interaction arose and the following discourse were offered by the research respondents at UUM about the use of technologies to increase teacher-learner comprehension and interaction:

Interaction is the essence of distance learning. ICT has helped the learning process. Without it you can be assured that success in DE will be more challenging. Nevertheless, interactivity in distance learning is not the responsibility of just the distance learners... The reality is there's a lot more to do like providing effective IT infrastructure, better access to ICT facilities, training, and much more. We don't get enough support R 1: Interview 4

I was quite disappointed in the course at the end. I mean...I got something out of it. I found some of the course interesting and entertaining, but regretfully, I felt lonely most of the duration I was in DE...I understand that most or many of my DE friends are working, but you get bogged down when your questions, or cry for help from instructors get late reply, ...and you can't depend on your friends (other distance learners) as well because they too may have the same problems and busy with whatever...



**R 2:Interview 3**

**You talk about technology, the government, Ministry of Education, instructors, everybody talks about IT, ICT, e-learning, e-government... but reality is you are moving too fast ahead. Have you ever think about the learners? The sorts of problems that they may encounter...**

**R 3:Interview 4**

**My age is 45. I have left school and education a good 20 years. Things are different today. You have too high of an expectation on the use of a technology. Getting near to it is scary... using it is unthinkable. That was what I felt when I first came back to pursue my degree course through DE. Even today, I still feel uneasy using technology in my learning. What I need is help, coaching and more training.**

**R4:Interview 4**

**Coming back for a degree has been a true challenge for me especially when the learning and teaching environment have changed drastically. What made it worse; if you are slow you'll be left out fast. I am talking not just about computers and how to use it, but learning to use it.**

**R9:Interview 4**

**DLs do not see each other or their DTs as frequently as their campus-based counterparts. This absence of contacts leads to feelings of isolation as evident in the above discourse. In the Malaysia context, the absence of a teacher or in-frequent f2f meetings can lead to monumental frustrations. Perhaps this can be attributed to their prior experiences with the Malaysia Educational system, which are very much teacher centered and probably not a good basis for independent study. Although, the educational system is changing and much effort has been made to shift to learning and learner centered approach, changes don't come easy. For many of the respondents who went through the former educational system for 12 years, moving from it into a more independent, and self directed learning posed a challenge.**

**R 8 for example, stated:**

**I am lost most of the time. I don't really know if I have participated well, or if my contribution to the course is sufficient in the eyes of my instructors. You asked about technology and the use of it in my learning and the teaching of the instructors. That is the problem; technology lacks human or personal touch. I just don't feel the satisfaction of being in the class physically and able to have eye contact with the instructor or to raise hands, ask a question and getting prompt response. The minute you post questions through email, and not getting reply 5 minutes, 15 minutes, an hour or more, you'll feel frustrated.**

**Lack of prompt feedback was another source of frustration for some of the respondents because they were always concerned about their performance. Given the lack of encouraging cues from DTs made them feel left in the dark about their progress in the course. Interaction is fundamental to the effectiveness of DL, and once DLs sense being left out or in isolation or not getting sufficient attention, frustrations, anger, panic would emerge as described by R12:**

**What ever type of student you are, distance or campus based, you pay the same amount of fee, in fact mathematically a distance learner may have to**

**bear more cost like printing, traveling, and what have you, but when your email doesn't get replied within 24 hours, I feel robbed...I do. That demotivate you. So how can you progress well in such situation?**

**R 12: Interview 3**

**Not surprisingly, time management too surface as a concern in distance learning. The following quote from one respondent summarizes it best:**

**DE has taught me many things. Over different semesters I have learned many new skills, but most of all I have learned the importance of being responsible and committed even when I am not being watched. With some DE courses conducted with heavy reliance on the computers, and Internet search... it has been really easy to slip behind in the course work. As students I think students like myself are used to being in a structured classroom where our progress is closely monitored by the teachers or instructors. This class allows the student freedom to complete work at their own pace while teaching them responsibility. Really, you have to systematically plan, and manage your time wisely. Nobody gets a minute extra, it is always 24 hours a day.**

**R 07: Interview 4**

**Based on some of the data collected, and the initial analysis, it can be interpreted that the underlying common cause of frustrations and setbacks as revealed by the respondents are the lack of student support and sensitivity to DLs needs at UUM.**

### **The Needs of Distance Learners**

**The reasons for attrition in DE at UUM are varied, and may include inappropriate subject selection, inadequate academic preparation, economic hardship, ineffective time management strategies, unrealistic expectations, and external pressures. Learner's frustrations and learning setbacks could well be a contributing factor. Whatever the reason, the effect of such attrition is undesirable from the perspective of DLs and institutions. Not only should academic support services enhance distance learning experience, they should also assist DLs in staying on.**

**DLs are heterogeneous than the full time learners, and DE providers need to be sensitive to the general 'make-up' of a distance learner i.e. age, gender, academic background, family background, career, etc., and make attempts to attend to their needs. We need to realize that DLs are a different group of learners who have different needs. As iterated by some of the respondents:**

**Computers, technology, and today another buzz word ICT never have entered my life, at least not directly....at 45 having had to learn to use computers and word processor was ...don't know what to say. Reading the IDIOT guide to Internet and Computers was hard enough. I cannot learn it on my own just won't happen, I just don't have the confidence. What I need is special coaching or a special class at least to teach the basics of it...**

**R5: Interview 3**

**Looking at the young learners, or even looking at my children who are able to use, operate computers, software and so on...and comparing to that to myself... who uses 2 fingers to punch on the keyboard, and having my heart beat beating 10 fold each time something went wrong or a window appeared**

**on the screen, I am naïve about technology and too scared to venture. What I need is help, constant tutoring, a class that teaches lessons on computers, Internet...I think such activities would be much appreciated especially for student like me...**

**R7: Interview 4**

**Clearly, the respondents are asking for learning support. On this evidence, they appear to need assistance, training, and perhaps mentoring. DTs and providers have a responsibility to address the problems that DLs face on a daily basis. For example, one clear problem revealed by respondents in this study is the feeling of inadequacy of technological skills. The respondents' perspective on learning, and in particular the use of technology shows that they need more support and training opportunities. Technology should not be seen as "...potential silver bullet"**

**(Twigg, 1977) to remedy learning and teaching problems. Technology is just a tool; it is the experiences that propel learning. An understanding of DLs behavior with technology and asking questions like: Do DLs use computers on a daily basis? Do they have a computer at home, at their working place?, Do they have easy access?, What do they need?, How could learning be improved? How could interactivity in distance learning be improved? are imperative in order to provide support for effective technological resources, which will propel better learning interactions .**

## **Discussion**

**Many DLs require support and guidance to make the most of their distance learning experiences (Threlkeld and Brzoska, 1994; Rashid et.al,1993; Idrus and Mat Zin,1992). This support typically takes the form of some combination of learning interactions. Research findings in this study identify important guidelines for DE considerations. Among others, it is evident at least in the findings that**

- 1. DLs value timely feedback from their DTs regarding course assignments, exams, projects and their inquiries.**
- 2. DLs seem more motivated if they are in frequent contact with their respective DTs.**
- 3. DTs who develop a personal rapport with their learners and who are familiar with technologies used and other course materials increases DLs satisfaction with their distance learning.**

**However, as revealed earlier, the underlying cause of the frustrations and set-backs encountered in using technology is the lack of student support to student needs at UUM. In depth investigation suggests these frustrations are caused by poor DTs-DLs interaction, and technological barrier. Poor interaction between learner and content, or learner with learner is less critical, but significant in terms of DLs with DTs interaction. Most DLs need continuous interactions with their DTs ; they need clear directions that are not ambiguous in any way. This helps them understand the content and help them be able to learn effectively.**

**Similarly, with regards to the technological barrier, it is imperative for DTs and DE providers to be sensitive to DLs different needs. One cannot assume that everybody knows the basics of computing. As revealed in this UUM study, some of the respondents had minimal access to computers, and exhibited inadequate knowledge or incompetent to use computer technology. In addition, Wallace (in Murphy et.al 2001:p.26) stated that: "Programming decisions should not be based upon assumptions about student demographics and needs...On the other hand, all educational experiences are values based, and part of the learning experience is development of the concept of a community of ideas and practice." Value of learning is something that learners know best. Such contribution of knowledge provides endless possibilities for improvement to existing DE**

**courses and programs. DLs need to be integrated in the cycle of improvement of DE courses. Listening and getting continuous feedback from DLs on what works and what doesn't work is crucial as pointed by Murphy et.al (2001:p.172): "The value of listening to students is apparent...with evaluation featuring strongly as part of the iterative cycle of development. Student feedback...helped...to realign their assumptions about student interaction." It is for this obvious reason that an analysis and study of how USM conducted her OCAP is worth investigating.**

#### **Giving Meaning to Learning Support: The Universiti Sains Malaysia Off-Campus Academic Program (OCAP)**

**Evidently there are a number of studies of learning support pertaining to classroom settings been conducted. In distance education research, attempts have been made to study learning support from a distance education perspective, however, the numbers are small, but growing. As there is no one solution or strategy in learning support that provide effective interaction and the 'best' learning outcome, this gives more opportunity for research in this area. Nevertheless, as pointed by Rashid et.al (1993), "It is clear that students who engage in distance learning need support to sustain their interest in learning"(p.77).**

**We believe learning supports should enhance interaction and the learning process in DE. Donald (1997:xi) argues this when he says that learning support should be productive rather than merely neutral. He further relates learning support to a more holistic and acceptable definition which aligns itself more appropriately in terms of the focus of the study: "The learning support consists of the entire setting in which learning takes place... the disciplines that provide the knowledge learning support, the learners and the arrangements made for them, the teaching and learning process, and the assessment of learning, institution and programs."**

**This would seem to imply that DTs at UUM too need to rethink their neutrality. Do they need to become advocates for their students rather judges of their performance?**

**Since its inception at USM, various forms of supports systems have been developed for the purpose of DE at the institution. Although it was initially develop for the benefit of the administrators and DTs and more to facilitate the f2f meetings of DTs and DLs; a shift of its orientation occurred in 1986 after which OCAP operates more to address the needs of DLs.**

**The type of support facilities developed within OCAP is in the form of printed material to facilitate learners access to a wider range of alternative courses and study materials. This type of support service is also geared toward providing opportunity for DLs to develop personal study strategies and forward planning. The following are the different types of support provided by OCAP to DLs at USM: Centre for Off-Campus Studies' Academic Planning Handbook; Library facilities at Regional distance learning centres; OCAP Newsletter; Teletutorials lists; Student academic record; Regional centres student association; Academic counselling sessions; Counselling services; Off-campus students' association; Orientation program for new DLs; OCAP prospectus; Advance registration facilities & OCAP radio program.**

**In addition to OCAP and the services it provides, the School of DE at USM also makes it compulsory for new DLs to enroll into an introductory course on Distance Learning. This is a course that introduces the concept of DE, and focuses on learning skills and expectations in distance learning. Distance learners have regarded the course as very informative and useful. Such course helps DLs undergo the transitional and adaptation period with much success and helps them in their learning endeavor. Such effort is worth looking at and examine for possible benchmark activities for DE institution like UUM. Therefore, developing a DE network and collaborating with other DE institutions like USM may be a**

**pragmatic approach in bringing changes to the DE courses, programs, and environment at UUM.**

**On going evaluation and assessment of DE courses, programs and student support services is another important activity that needs attention and action from DE providers and DTs. As distance educators, have we ever confront ourselves and ask the questions of 'Have I done enough for the students?' 'What didn't I do, or should do to help the needy ones improve their learning? Understanding the task, role and responsibility being DTs begins first by understanding the meaning of interaction and what it entails in distance learning, and what part you play in delivering those services. As DLs need to 'undo' their learning practices, and expectations to cope with the new ways in learning at a distance, so need the DTs. They too need to reassess and reexamine their educational careers in DE. Doing the evaluation and assessment with the DLs will be most pragmatic. Research needs to be conducted to listen and understand the DLs perspective and experience on distance learning. Study conducted by Rashid et.al (1993) on student support and services for example allows SDE at USM to understand the effectiveness of OCAP based on their learners' perspective. This is important particularly in improving the future OCAP services. Such research has monumental effect on 'changes to be done'. As an institution, UUM has to encourage her academics and DTs to engage with more research studying student support services and need of the DLs. Research by Mahamud et.al, (2000) on time management of UUM DLs is lauded but more research need to be done to better understand distance learning at UUM.**

**The fact remains that learning support can predictably affect interaction in distance learning – positively if planned well but negatively if attention has not been paid to the conditions under which learning best occurs. In reality its importance has been undervalued. Many measurement of educational institution effectiveness tends to ignore the context of learning, focusing instead on the selection and performance of staff, learners and technology used. We believe effective learning support should be designed to enable learners be interactive and concentrate on their studies, free from distracting elements. In a distance learning institution similar to USM, learning support at UUM should facilitate learning and access to knowledge. It is thus imperative that DTs have an in-depth understanding of the impact of learning support has on interaction and the learning process as a whole and some understanding of the content of the courses being taught.**

**Various conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of DTs in providing learning support to facilitate interaction in distance learning and subsequently striving towards providing a better distance learning experience:**

- 1. As evident from the findings of this study many of the respondents agree that a strong concern in distance learning is the aspect of the "loneliness" or "isolation" experienced by the learner. It is for this reason the learning support needs to be as supportive. USM's contribution in providing such services via OCAP should be studied and analyzed for possible adaptation. The wide range of learning support services provide the DLs optimal support to help them with any eventualities in distance learning. The crucial point of OCAP is its acknowledgement that DLs are heterogeneous and different than their counterparts- the full time campus based learners. Such services may promote sense of belongingness of the learners and minimize the feeling of isolation.**
- 2. The issue of availability and responsiveness of DTs towards DLs is a plausible cause of the feeling of isolation among the DLs at UUM. Some DLs as evident in the data expected the DTs to be 'approachable' and 'contactable' as needed and be responsive to their situation and needs. The learners value timely feedback from their instructors regarding course assignments, exams, projects and their inquiries. It is important then for DTs to attend their students promptly and efficiently. Such commitment as evident in this paper will help to improve learning and ease much frustrations.**
- 3. It is also evident that there is an urgent training and development need for DTs at UUM**

practice regarding learning supports and the role that they can and should fulfill.

4. In order to address the broad spectrum of learning needs of an increasingly diverse DLs , it is important that different formats of delivery modes as implemented by USM who is engaging with its 5th generation of its DLs (Taylor,1999) are used. DTs need to employ a wide variety of methods in programme design in order to accommodate as many learning approaches as possible. More focus needs to be placed on methods that stress problem solving, and critical and reflective thinking. Furthermore, methods that emphasize co-operative learning as well as those that individualize instruction will be equally important.

5. Facilitating self directed learning can be promoted by integrating learning activities that contain flexibility and provide DLs with opportunities to experience that there may be many right answers or responses when completing assignments and projects. If the content allows, DTs should communicate to students that autonomy is strongly encouraged and that the learning process is just as valuable as the actual product.

## Conclusion

Promoting interactions among the first three components of interactions in distance learning as shown in diagram 1(as shown on page 5) is not an easy task. Getting DLs to interact using technology could also be a very challenging task (Stratfold, 1998). Therefore, it is important to provide sufficient support and sensitivity to DLs needs in order to enhance learning. Therefore, in designing the learning support, this paper wishes to encourage the DE providers and DTs to choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular learning contexts. It is important to note that the recommendations that this research proposes for UUM to adapt USM approaches are certainly not the last answers to enhance interaction in distance learning scenario. Nor do they necessarily provide optimal advice pertaining to components within the learning support to enhance interaction. They are however made in an earnest effort to firstly sensitize DTs of the importance of their role in providing DTs-DLs interaction in distance learning and more importantly to stimulate thought, dialogue, and future research in distance learning. Only when effective interaction between distance teachers-learners exist and sustained can DTs begin to influence the DLs approaches to learning and instill change. This paper shows that distance teaching and learning should focus on DLs ability and choice, the relationship between theory and application, the diversity in individual learning styles and needs, and the required support mechanisms to be successful in distance learning. Last but not least, apart from what have been research in DE for the last two decades, we must consciously and actively develop and maintain approaches, which enable DLs to have their voices heard, and for DTs and tutors and the institution itself to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said by the DLs. The DLs should never be perceived as the problem(s), but should be perceived and integrated as part of the solution(s) to any DE problems and issues. Such approach and attitude we think will benefit all stakeholders in DE

## References

Anderson, T.(1994). Using the internet for distance education delivery and professional development, *Open Praxis*,2,8-11, in Idrus,R.M., Lateh,H.(2000). *Online Distance Education at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia: Preliminary Perceptions*, Education Media International: Intenational Council for Education Media, pp.197-201.

Bates, A.W. (1991). Interactivity as a criterion for media selection in distance education, *Never too Far*, vol.16,5-9.

Biggs, J.B. (1987). *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying*, Melbourne, Australis Council for Education Research.

Borsook, T.K. & Higginbotham-Wheat,N. (1991). Interactivity: What is it and what can it do for computer based instruction, *Educational Technology*,vol.31,10,11-17.

**Dzakiria, H. & Walker, R. (2002) Unpublished. Frustrations and Learning Setbacks in Using Technology in Distance Learning: A Case Study of DLs at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Paper presented at the 2nd Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Durban, 29th July-3rd August, 2002, South Africa**

**Dzakiria,H. & Walker,R. (2002)Unpublished. The Teacher is Always There, but isn't. Students Perspective on Learning Support: A Plea Not Just for Knowledge. Paper presented at Simposio Internacional Sobre Posibilidades Y Limites De La Ensenanza Virtual En El Ambito Universitario. La Experiencia De Las Universidades Andaluzas at Sede Antonio Machado de Baeza, Spain.**

**Donald, J. 1997. Improving the learning support for Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.**

**Gibson,C.C. (1998). The Distance Learner in Context. In C.Gibson (Ed.), Distance Learners in Higher Education: Institutional Responses for Quality Outcomes, Atwood Publishing: Madison, Wisconsin.**

**Hara,N. & Kling, R.(1999), Learners' frustrations with web-based distance education course. First Monday, 4(12), [http://firstmonday.org.issues/issue4\\_12/index.html](http://firstmonday.org.issues/issue4_12/index.html).**

**Hillman, D.C.A (1994).Learner-interface interaction in distance education: An extension of contemporary models and strategies for practitioners, American Journal of Distance Education, vol.8,2,pp.30-42.**

**Idrus,R.M., Lateh,H.(2000). Online Distance Education at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia: Preliminary Perceptions, Education Media International: Intenational Council for Education Media, pp.197-201.**

**Idrus,R.M, Mat Zin,A.R. (1992). Supporting Adult Learners in Distance Education at the Centre for Off-Campus Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia, International Journal of University Adult Education, Vol.XXXI,1,pp.51-62.**

**Livengood, M.D. (1987). Interactivity:Buzzword or instructional technique?, Performance and Instruction, vol.26,8,29-29.**

**Mahamud,K.R., Alipiah, F.M. & Johari,A. (2000). Time management of Universiti Utara Malaysia Distance Learning Student, Malaysia Journal of Distance Education, vol.2,1,pp.59-66.**

**Mason, R. (1994). Using communication media for open and flexible learning, Kogan Page, London.**

**McArthur, D. & Lewis, M. (1997), Untangling the Web: Applications of the Internet and other information technologies to Higher Education, Santa Monica: Institute of Education and Training.**

**McCloughlin, C. & Marchall, L (2000). Scaffolding: A Model for learner support in an online teaching environment. In A. Herrmann and M.M. Kulski (Eds), Flexible Futures in Tertiary Teaching. Proceedings of the 9th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, 2-4 February 2000, Perth: Curtin University of Technology.**

**Miller and Webster (1997), A comparison of interaction needs and performance of distance learners in synchronous and a synchronous classes. Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention, Las Vegas, Nevada.**

**Moore, M.G. (1989). Three types of interaction. The American Journal of Distance Education, 3(2),pp.1-6.**

**Murphy, T.H. (1997). Five factors to evaluate distance education programs. NACTA Journal, 42(3),6-10.**

**Murphy,D.; Walker, R. and Webb,G. (2001). Online Learning and Teaching With Technology: Case studies, Experience and Practice, Kogan Page.**

**Perrin, K.M., & Mayhew, D. (2000). The reality of designing and implementing an internet-based course. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration. Retrieved at: <http://www.westga.edu/distance/ojdl/winter34/mayhew34.html>.**

**Rashid, M.R., Nordin,M.R., Sulaiman,S., Ibrahim,A.R., Majid,O. (1993). Supporting student learning and developing self-directed learning at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Chapter 7 (pp.70-77) of Research in Distance Education, Edited by Terry Evans and David Murphy, Deakin University Press.**

**Reber,A. (1985). Penguin Dictionary of Psychology, London: Penguin.**

**Salmon, G. (2000a), Driving across stepping stones, in M.Asensio,J. Foster, V. Hodgson & D.& McConnell (Eds), Networked Learning 2000. Innovative Approaches to Lifelong Learning and Higher Education through the Internet, Lancaster: Lancaster University Press.**

**Saw,K.G., Awang, M.N., Idrus, R.M., Atan, H., Azli, N.A., Jaafar, I, Rahman, Z.A. and Latiff, Z.A. (1999). Educational Transition of East Malaysian Distance Learners, Open Learning, Volume 14, No. 3, pp.24-36.**

**Simpson, O. (2002). Supporting Students in Online, Open and Distance Learning (2nd edition), London: Kogan Page.**

**Simpson, O. (1992). Specifying Student Support Services in the OU-the so-called 'student character, Open Learning, 7(2), pp.57-59.**

**Simpson, R.J. & Galbo, J.J. (1986). Interaction and learning: Therorising on the art of teaching, Interchange,Vol.17,4,24-26.**

**Stratfold, M. (1998). Promoting learner dialogues on the web, in M. Eisenstadt & T. Vincent (Eds), The Knowledge Web, London: Kogan Page.**

**Taylor,J.C. (1999). Distance Education: The Fifth Generation. Paper presented at the 19th ICDE World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education, Vienna.**

**Tobin, T.J. (2001). Dealing with problem students and faculty. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration. Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/distance/ojdl/fall43/tobin43.html>**

**Threlkeld, R. & Brzoska, K. (1994). Research in distance education. In B. Willis (Ed.), Distance Education: Strategies and Tools. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, Inc.**

**Twigg, C.A. (1977). Is Technology a Silver Bullet? Educom Review:pp.:28-29.**



**PRINT**

**RETURN**