How to support students in building their e-portfolios on course H808?

1. Introduction

Amongst my tutor group of 15 students there were three students who had significant problems with technology and in particular the e-portfolio system. They had no experience of using online tools except for general World Wide Web searching. However, they had some experience of e-learning although in different educational contexts (i.e. adult and community learning and higher education) and focused around blended approaches. In general terms they had similar technical and subject experience.

All of these students early in the course contacted me to ask for help with the technical aspects of e-portfolio system. In particular, they found it difficult to visualise the nature of a system that allowed them to create different portfolios for different purposes. The student quote below illustrates the issues:

"as you know I am still getting to grips with all the technology (a life's work, I am beginning to realise)"

The students also used the student help desk but did not find that it produced the type of help that they needed.

This practitioner-based research reviews the support provided to these three students and to another student who I judged as having similar understanding and experience of e-learning but with more technical skills. In addition I reviewed and reflected on my overall approach to supporting the tutor groups' students. The three students were the most challenging to support in that they were essentially developing two sets of understanding.

Other students asked questions about the e-portfolio system but they differed in that they were focused on content and evidence and the number of technical queries quickly reduced as the course progressed.

The overall question that this investigation addressed was:

How to support students with limited technical skills to develop e-portfolios that demonstrate their competency as e-learning professionals.

2. Approach

In straightforward terms, my approach to supporting all the students was:

1. supportive with the aim of helping them to solve problems
2. providing feedback on their evidence through comments within the portfolio but also through e-mail discussion
3. proactive in reminding them of issues – identifying and suggesting improvements

The feedback was very important and I have quoted a student message below to illustrate its value:

"I've just seen your comments on my 1000-word essay. Thanks! What encouragement! I think studying in isolation is one of the most daunting aspects of distance education. Although we're in a fortunate age where asynchronous e-conferencing greatly enhances interaction at a distance, it's (for me) a poor replacement for face-to-face. I do see the benefits though. What with my frequent relocations, I wouldn't be doing this course if it didn't have the spatial flexibility."

2.1 Students with Technical Barriers

The three students who had more technical barriers to overcome also received telephone support. This took the form of timed telephone meetings to discuss specific issues. The meetings took the form of tutorial about using the e-portfolio system and lasted between twenty minutes and an hour. They came about when one student requested this form of assistance and I extended it to the other two students when I realised it was effective.

3. Findings

3.1 Direct E-mail Analysis

All the students in my tutor group sent e-mails directly to me so that I could provide support. Table 1 shows an analysis of the messages sent by the three students with technical difficulties and the comparison student, including comments on telephone contacts. No other student requested telephone contact. All the students had been sent my telephone contact details at the start of the course.

Fifty-nine percent of the messages sent by the three students with technical problems concerned technical questions with a range of 47% to 83%. Only 10% of the comparison student's messages concerned technical aspects. I also reviewed e-mail messages sent to the self-help technical conferences from my group. From the messages sent, only one of the three students with technical problems asked for help through the group. Her messages were mainly focused on the problems of uploading completed TMAs and did not cover the same issues for which she requested my assistance. Overall my whole tutor group did not use the self-help conference for support. Only four students sent messages. Obviously others may well have lurked in the conference and benefited from reading the discussion. Within the tutor group weekly conferences there was a number of examples of support being asked for and given relating to technical issues. The example below illustrates the type of dialogue:

"*How did you make links (and set up) different pages in the Wiki? Would welcome your advice.*

The tip is adding the following symbol between the word/ the title of the page"

The type of question that appeared to be well supported by the conference was quite specific, dealing with a discrete issue. In comparison, the questions sent to me where less focused and probably reflected the students' lack of understanding of the technology they were seeking to employ. The example below illustrates this type of message:

"Thanks for your comment on my ecompetency portfolio. I deleted it, not realising that this is what I was doing. I have your earlier comments but just deleted the one about the competencies. Can I really have deleted it? I clicked the X beside it on the front of the portfolio. If you can tell me how to retrieve it, that would be great. I don't suppose you have a copy?"

Some messages showed the frustration of the students with the technical issues.

"there MUST be a limit to the new tools we have to learn about"

I asked all three students if they were using the student helpline and they all told me that they did, but often in relation to specific technical questions similar to those they posed to the self help conference. When they were puzzled or unable to articulate a specific question, they did not feel the helpline was appropriate.

Table 1 Analysis of Direct E-mail Contacts

Student	E-portfolio technical problems	Other Technical problems	Other messages	Telephone contact	Comments
Student 1	17	1	20	Several telephone calls and one significant tutorial on technical issues	Messages were balanced between technical and content Although she found technology a challenge this did not seem to distract her from course content
Student 2	9	6	13	Several telephone calls and one significant tutorial on technical issues	Technology was the main issue; other messages tended to focus on associated issues, not on course content
Student 3	14	6	4	Two telephone calls but both were significant tutorials on technical issues	Main focus was help with technology - little discussion about course content
Total	40	13	37		
Comparison Student	2	2	37	none	No technical problems – focus was on the course and its content

3.2 Comparison of technical with course content messages

Table 1 compares the messages sent by the three students who had problems with the technical skills and understanding required for the course, compared to a student who did not have technical difficulties. The latter student was judged typical of the other students. The clear difference is that the support provided was focused on the course content while the three students with technical problems were distracted and asked relatively few content questions. My personal judgement is that two of the students did not progress as well as similar students without technical difficulties. This is a personal view and therefore subjective but one of them failed to complete the course. Student 1 did overcome many of the technical problems and progressed as well as other students. She was able to ask for support with both technical and content issues in a balanced way. It did appear she was able to give more time to the course than the other two, but again, this is a subjective judgement.

4. Telephone tutorial

The telephone tutorials were initiated following a request from one student with technical problems. She asked that I talked her through use of the e-portfolio system which she found baffling. The approach was for both of us to access the e-portfolio system while linked by telephone so that I could explain how to use the system. The tutorial lasted about an hour and was very effective. I then offered the same approach to the other two students and again I found it effective in helping them visualise the system and improve their confidence.

In addition, the students with technical difficulties also telephoned me with specific questions on their own initiative. The telephone tutorial approach I judged as a useful tool to deal with significant problems related to understanding the technology.

5. Analysis

5.1 General view of how I communicated

My intention was to take a proactive approach to communication with the tutor group conference based on my previous experience of online groups. However, when I analysed my correspondence it showed that I was reacting to student messages 60% of the time and being proactive in the other 40% of my messages. On reflection, this seems to be a reasonable balance. My proactive messages took the form of:

- drawing the students' attention to future issues in order to help them manage their time
- showing them I taking an interest in their discussions
- occasionally joining in the discussion
- general supportive messages

I was conscious of the division in responsibility between the tutor and moderator and that discouraged me from more active participation. However, I have concluded that this was sufficient.

In addition to communicating through the tutor group conference, I also sought to comment on student entries in their blogs and e-portfolios. My intention was to comment on as many items as possible. The students seemed to value the feedback and during the course they began to tell me whenever new work was added to their portfolios. The examples below show this type of message.

"Just to let you know that I have put a new item containing some feedback that I have had about my VC work in my eportfolio. I am planning to use it as supporting evidence for activity 12.2, which I hope to complete over the weekend."

*"thank you for all your help, support, reassurance and general being-there-ness.
This course was terrific, notwithstanding the technological frustrations. My learning has been huge and the stresses therein were greatly alleviated by your support."*

"Thanks Alan. I have added the research to my portfolio."

I was often asked to review e-portfolio or blog content and the example below illustrates this type of message.

"I would be grateful for your advice."

5.2 Pace and Structure of the course

At one stage in the course, a majority of the students spontaneously started to discuss the pace and structure of the programme. The two examples drawn from messages from the whole tutor group not limited to the students with technical difficulties are good examples of the student concerns:

"Feeling that I am always behind is quite stressful, and rather than having online resources that I can access wherever, when ever, I do miss having a book to carry around and read on the train. (I understand that e-learning and online materials go together). Some of these issues are down to me and my organisational skills, some are physical (screen reading), and some are just things that I need to get used to."

"I must say that I hadn't appreciated quite how much there was to do on this course and I am finding it extremely hard to fit everything in that is required in each week, so much so, that I am desperately behind. I am considering missing this week's work (to come back to later) so that I can start the multimedia activity and get involved in it with others. Does that sound reasonable"

I was very conscious of the pace of the course and the need for students to plan and manage their time so there is a pattern of messages sent to the whole group to remind them of deadlines or ask them to consider forthcoming assignments. I also sent specific messages to individual students who had not communicated for a while. In comparison with my experience on other Open University courses, H808 required the students to communicate more regularly and plan ahead. There was less opportunity to be flexible without having to make a clear decision not to take part in an activity or assignment. My own judgement is that the tutor group as a whole were reluctant to decide to miss an item out. This was due in large part to their motivation to participate. The pattern seems to be that about 7 or 8 students participate in any one week but not necessarily the same 7 or 8. I don't personally think that is unhealthy just the flexibility of online learning happening but the students wanted to participate in everything. The remaining students were still completing the previous week's tasks.

Some examples of messages are:

"Am I the only one who feels that the pace of the timetabling and the number of collaborative activities reduces their potential value - fewer collaborative activities over a longer period might be of more benefit and give everyone a chance to participate - at present if you tend to get your work done over the weekend the collaborative aspect is lost as others have moved on to next weeks conference. - Just a thought."

A second student's comment in support:

"I totally agree. I am finding things really difficult timewise to fit in with collaboration. As you can tell I'm a week behind but catching up.

I can't really do justice to the collaborative tasks because of this."

The three students with technical problems also felt that the course's pace and structure was very demanding. The additional problem of a lack of technical experience certainly added to the pressure and one student did drop out of the programme, citing the pace and demands of the course as her reason. At the point she stopped, in my judgement, she was coping with both the technical challenge and course reasonably well although she needed to expend a considerable effort. The question is whether she could have successfully completed the course if she had not encountered the technical problems.

I found that part of the tutor's role was to provide someone for the students to grumble to. The example below illustrates the point.

"I feel like a bit of a moan so forgive the next comment, but I am sure you will understand where I am coming from: the time I am spending on the logistics of the course is eating into the time I have available to do the content of the course. I'm feeling really behind the others and it's not doing much for my self-esteem."

5.3 Motivation

The tutor group were in my judgement well motivated and in my experience this was one of the more motivated groups that I have worked with. This immediately raises the question would a less motivated group succeed? However, it did take many weeks for the stduents to begin to function as a group and, again in my judgement this was only partial. The example below illustrates that in this student's view that it took to week 13 to form a group.

"I have really enjoyed this weeks work, and need to get on with week 13 now (well, tomorrow, anyway)! I feel like I have begun to really get to know other group members."

It always takes time for a group to form but I would have expected that it would have occurred before the 13th week. I suspect that the pace and structure of the course tended to slow the process but it is very difficult to be certain. Different groups will come together at different rates.

6. Discussion

It is clear that students who start the course with insufficient technical skills will encounter a significant extra barrier to succeeding. It is not just that they will need to learn about the technology as well as the other aspects of the course but that this distracts them from the content and prevents them from using the resource provided by the tutor to help them with the course content. The students were sometimes unable to present a specific question that their peers or helpline could assist with and resorted to asking the tutor more open-ended ones.

With very general problems, a student may be unable in a single e-mail message to articulate the problem. It needs to be explored in depth for effective help to be provided. The telephone tutorial that allows for detailed and fast analysis of the issues was found to be a useful way of solving problems. However, the danger is that the major support is directed at technical problems while course content receives less help.

General communication is a balance of reacting to queries, providing feedback and offering proactive support. Even with an intention to be proactive, a high proportion of messages are likely to be reactive. Students clearly value feedback and comments on blogs and portfolio evidence is essential. The tutor's role is very active and intense. There is a need to focus continuously on the course. Messages need to be read at least daily and that the structure of the course means that each weekly assignment provides a new wave of activity while the

tutor is still dealing with students working on the previous assignments. The tutor needs to be able to focus on the overall group while being flexible enough to deal with individual problems.

7. Conclusion

The question that this investigation aimed to consider was:

How to support students with limited technical skills to develop e-portfolios that demonstrate their competency as e-learning professionals.

The evidence provided by the review is that more assistance than the self-help forum or technical help line is required by students with limited technical skills. The individual telephone tutorial is an effective method when combined with e-mail support. However, the technical issues tend to distract students from the content of the course because they fail to use the tutor as a resource to support their learning of the programme content. Additional proactive assistance may well be needed on top to overcome this problem. Students with limited technical skills will probably have to make a greater effort than other students and are more likely at an increased risk of dropping out.

Alan Clarke
H808 Tutor