Becoming an Online Distance Learner: What can be learned from students' experiences of induction to distance programmes?

Gary Motteram and Gillian Forrester*
The University of Manchester, UK

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study that investigated the experiences of distance learners beginning online Master of Education programmes. The research explored students' induction (referred to as "orientation" in some contexts) to the programmes, and three key areas are given consideration in this paper. First, the opportunities and constraints provided by the technology in terms of introducing students to their online studies and the online environment are discussed. Second, some human elements are examined; namely, students' needs, students' relationships with fellow students, and the role of tutors. Third, there is a discussion on the development of online learning communities; their role and importance, and how students might be effectively integrated into them. Some implications for online teaching and learning are outlined and recommendations for online induction are provided. The paper concludes that a fundamental understanding of both students' needs and their initial encounters with online distance education are important to ensure effective support is provided when students commence their studies.

Introduction

The development and advancement of new technologies has expanded the opportunities for distance educators, while also bringing new questions relating to the nature of teaching and learning, debates around online pedagogies, the needs of online distance education students and how they might be best supported via the Internet. Increasingly distance study is moving more towards online delivery (or a combination of various media), particularly with global competition for distance students and "institutions feeling the pressure to offer online courses" (Schrum, 1998, p. 53).

---

*Corresponding author. School of Education, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK. Email: gillian.forrester@manchester.ac.uk

How to productively use new technologies, particularly computer-mediated communication (CMC), for teaching and learning is a challenge facing all educational institutions.

The Language and Teacher Education Group at the University of Manchester has been delivering distance materials to English-language teaching students since 1988. These were initially based on a model whereby students received print-based and audio/video materials, complemented by residential study schools. Increasingly, materials and systems of support are being developed for electronic delivery to cater for an expanding e-learning community. At the same time, the University, like other traditional institutions of higher education, is managing expanding student numbers on campus and greater use of information and communication technologies for campus-based teaching. Materials that were originally conceived for distance learners are also being utilised for students studying on campus. Thus, institutions are required to ensure that students are introduced to their online studies effectively in order to progress successfully. General information about an institution, its surroundings, and student life is now typically provided by universities via Web pages, and these can be a valuable resource particularly for distance students who may never physically visit the institution. Other, more focused, pages are also added to provide for the needs of the students who study at a distance.

A wide range of technological tools is available to distance educators, and experience has been gained in the application of appropriate pedagogies for online learning. These developments are not generally consolidated nor specified as tried and tested guidance about how best to introduce students to online distance study. Noteworthy exceptions are Palloff and Pratt (2003) who outline eight elements of good orientation for the virtual student, and Salmon (2000, pp. 110–111) who posits 21 suggestions for online participant induction.

The main objectives of this research were to identify students' needs as new distance learners, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' engagement with online distance education, and to provide generic recommendations for effective induction for students commencing online distance study. We investigated the induction experiences of students enrolled on the Master of Education (M.Ed.) programmes offered by The Language and Teacher Education Group at the University of Manchester. They comprise the M.Ed. in English Language Teaching and the M.Ed. in Educational Technology and English Language Teaching. These are professional courses designed for qualified (mainly English-language) teachers with at least 3 years of teaching experience. Students are thus mature adults often studying part-time while working in a range of different educational institutions worldwide. As educationalists, predictably they may have more knowledge about pedagogy than other adult learners and probably a greater awareness of what distance learning might involve. Arguably, however, they share the same cultural and linguistic diversities of other distance learner groups along with individual learning needs and preferred learning approaches. We therefore consider that, ideally, induction should be designed generically to effectively introduce students to online distance learning and their programmes while at the same time accommodating the

individual needs and preferences of the students. The recommendations made at the end of this paper take account of the homogeneous and heterogeneous characteristics of students. We consider that these recommendations can be generalised to the broader range of distance learners.

Induction to Online Distance Learning and Online Communities

A search of related literature was conducted to ascertain what research and reviews of practice told us about online induction and students' experiences of becoming online learners. A growing body of research describing students' experiences of online learning has begun to emerge in the literature (e.g., Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2000; Burge, 1994; Howland & Moore, 2002; Picciano, 1998; Poole, 2000; Schifter & Monolescu, 2000). Literature relating to student support services in distance learning per se is in abundance (see, e.g., Dearnley, 2003; Dirr, 1999; Kenworthy, 2003; Krauth, 1999; Mills & Tait, 1996; Morgan & McKenzie, 2003; Somerville, 1998; Tait, 1995, 2000). Research that focuses specifically on students' formal induction or orientation to online programmes through the medium of new technologies and their initial experiences of commencing online forms of study, however, is relatively minimal. As Salmon (1998) observes, "Student induction ... is both sorely neglected and yet a key aspect of success for teaching and learning online" (p. 14).

Induction for online distance learning requires that students are successfully introduced to the new learning environment for self-study and are also introduced to online group work and activities. One of the perceived benefits of CMC for distance education is the opportunity it brings for geographically distanced students to communicate and interact with peers. Hailed as "third generation distance learning" (Nipper, 1989, p. 67), computer conferencing offers the potential for active group participation and reconstructs distance learning as a social process. While pre-online distance education has been reported by some as an autonomous, isolated experience (Eastmond, 1995; Stacey, 1999) others have recognised its capacity for interactivity, notably activities and questions in print-based texts (Lockwood, 1992; Rowntree, 1990), audio teleconferencing (Robertson, 1987), and student participation at residential study schools (Morgan & Thorpe, 1993). While interactivity need not necessarily be deployed in distance education, following a revival of interest in Vygotskian social constructivism, student interaction has come to be regarded as significant in facilitating and consolidating learning (Garrison, 1992; Laurillard, 1993).

A clear stance taken in the literature reviewed is that collaborative learning methods encourage dialogue, which facilitates "deeper" understanding, greater skill development, and the construction of knowledge (McConnell, 1992, as cited in Nixon & Salmon, 1996; Fung, 2004; Garrison, 1993; Hodgson & McConnell, 1995; Marjanovic, 1999). It is in this learning space that students often find reassurance, build relationships, and use each other as a "cognitive resource" (Wilson & Whitelock, 1998, p. 92). Indeed, online communication between distance students is purported by some authors as lessening student's feelings of isolation; bolstering

peer support networks; and producing more reflective, critical and informed written responses due to the medium's asynchronicity and/or more effective synthesis of knowledge (Eastmond, 1995; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Rovai, 2001; Wenger, 1999). The benefits and fruitfulness of online communities, however, are doubted by other commentators who report inconvenience, frustration, and difficulties in access for some students; information overload; the overly time-consuming nature of asynchronous communication; forced participation; and/or low levels of user involvement (see, e.g., Hara & Kling, 2000).

The "social presence" of the online student has become an important construct in the electronic communication research literature (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999). Social presence is characterised as the extent to which students can project their presence online when communicating in the textual milieu in the absence of visual or verbal signals. Social presence along with cognitive presence: "a condition of higher-order thinking and learning" (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 28) and teaching presence (encompassing teacher knowledge, course design, structure and organisation, and the facilitation of social and cognitive presence) are presented as key components of the online teaching and learning environment. Indeed, these authors suggest that social presence must be established effectively before cognitive presence can be achieved and sustained. Thus, it is important that distance educators determine the most effective means of introducing students to the online environment, supporting their assimilation to the virtual learning community and sustaining their motivation as online learners.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research is advocated for studies exploring student learning in distance education (Morgan, 1984, 1990). We adopted this approach due to the exploratory nature of the study (Creswell, 1994) and our desire to allow students to raise issues pertinent to them— which would not be possible within the rigid confines of the traditional survey method. We were interested in studying learners (see Evans, 1994, 1995; Gibson, 1990; Morgan, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Richardson, 2000) as they commenced their online distance studies, identifying their needs, and analysing the usefulness and appropriateness of the induction to the distance programmes.

The M.Ed. Programmes and Student Induction

The programmes are taught concurrently on campus (face-to-face) in Manchester and delivered at a distance to students worldwide (online and asynchronous) by the same teaching staff. Online technologies have gradually replaced printed materials and audio/video cassettes. The programmes were offered partially online for the first time in 2002, and online induction pages have been available since October 2003. The induction pages largely mirror the print/paper-based information previously sent out as Induction Packs. Appropriate hyperlinks connect the student to the University library pages and online catalogues, programme forums, tutor profiles,

and information about subscribing to mail lists. Video clips of the introductory lecture given on campus are also now available online. The use of video has been well received by distance students who consider it brings a more human or face-to-face element into the programme. This is often absent in distance forms of study and, for some M.Ed. students, appears to have facilitated bridging the "distance" void between tutors and peers.

Methods of Data Collection

A questionnaire was made available online to 27 distance students in November and December 2003, which they were invited to complete. It comprised five closed questions to ascertain social demographic information and a series of 12 open-ended questions allowing students considerable scope to express their points of view on induction to learning at a distance. Students were asked about, for example, their expectations of the programme, the preparations they had made prior to beginning the programme, their main concerns and worries about studying at a distance and online, what they considered were important or necessary skills and attributes required by online distance learners, and, since joining the programme, what support had they found most helpful or unhelpful. In addition, a further 20 M.Ed. students following the campus-based versions of these programmes completed the questionnaire, thus generating a comparative data set.

A second questionnaire was emailed to distance students only in March 2004. This comprised six questions and sought to ascertain a more reflective response from students regarding their induction to distance learning. Students were asked to describe their needs as distance learners and how their induction helped to meet these needs, what kind of support they expected from their induction and how their expectations were met (or not met), the kind of support they initially required from tutors, and how satisfied they were with the support provided. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with four students using a semi-structured interview schedule. Programme directors, course tutors, and administrators were also interviewed.

Analysis of Data

The data derived from the online and email questionnaires were stored in databases, later retrieved by the researcher and entered into the qualitative data analysis software application QSR NVivo™ (Qualitative Solutions and Research Software). The interviews were fully transcribed and uploaded to NVivo™. Using the Nvivo™ coding facility, a series of nodes were defined and created from emerging themes or issues in the data. In the first instance, segments of data that indicated similar perceptions, experiences, ideas, and concepts and that reflected the general questions, themes, and objectives embedded in the research were identified and allocated to nodes as appropriate (Gibbs, 2002). These were later refined and modified during the analytical process enabling linkages to be made as cases were compared.

Research Findings

This study stemmed from our interest in the induction experiences of online distance students, and we were also able to make some useful comparisons with the induction experiences of students studying the same programmes on campus in the more traditional face-to-face setting. We found that both sets of students shared similar concerns, anxieties, and learning needs at the outset of their studies relating to, for example, managing the workload, keeping up with readings, and being sufficiently motivated to complete the degree. Comments from both sets of students alluded to adapting to a new learning environment, whether this was online and at a distance or because they were overseas students studying for the first time in a UK university. Additionally, distance students—often combining part-time study with full-time employment—mentioned "balancing priorities", whereas this was not raised as an issue for campus-based students who were studying full-time. Distance students also highlighted concerns relating to "feeling isolated" due to their physical separation from the University.

In light of the findings of this research, three key areas are given consideration in this paper. First, the opportunities and constraints provided by the technology in terms of introducing students to their online studies and the online environment are discussed. Second, a number of "human" elements are examined; namely, students' needs as online distance learners, students' relationships with fellow students, and the role of tutors. Finally, there is a discussion on the development of online learning communities; their role and importance, and how students might be effectively integrated into them. We draw on examples from the data to illustrate these areas.

Opportunities and Constraints Provided by the Technology

Students' responses suggest that the online environment brings its own benefits, limitations, and challenges to learners. The first technical hurdle students encounter when commencing their online studies is becoming familiar with the computer telecommunications procedures and learning how to access, enter, and navigate sites. It was appreciated by some respondents that CMC enables distance students to contact and interact directly with their peers, bringing learners and, in this case, teaching professionals from other cultures and backgrounds together in a virtual learning environment with opportunities to debate educational and work-related issues as well as participating in course-related discussions. Students gave examples of the perceived opportunities of CMC:

> Ability to communicate with people in different parts of the world; different teaching situations.

> As a result of my Web site posting, another student studying in Switzerland contacted me and we exchanged emails and will probably meet later on.

Technological advances have facilitated access to libraries, and the proliferation of online databases, ejournals and ebooks with their retrieval mechanisms have vastly

increased the possibilities for students to locate and retrieve resources. Having a wide range of resources at their fingertips was regarded as very favourable for distance learners and acknowledged by some students:

> I've also made extensive use of the e-resources available ... Provision of links in the course material has been really useful as it means I don't have to spend hours searching to find what's relevant.

> The computer has so many things to offer. It is great that we can access files and journals and that kind of thing that I could never do before.

It is thus imperative that an induction equips the distance student with the requisite access and retrieval skills. The majority of respondents are first-time distance students and online learners, and some were frustrated by their early encounters with the technology either because of their own inexperience or the unpredictable local infrastructure. Students gave examples of what they perceived as the constraints of CMC:

> I had technical problems with the induction programme. After trying several times with help here and with the specialist at the University, I gave up. By the way, he never followed up ... the trouble-shooter.

> Africa ... the infrastructure is there, but 30 minute video links, sometimes I have to log onto the computer because of disruptions to the line, I will be doing that about ten times within thirty minutes.

> There was rather a barrage of emails requiring a lot of different things to be set up. I wasn't prepared for just how much of the material would be presented online, and this caused a few problems at first as I was using my computer at work which has several restrictions ... It took me a little while to get connected at home and then things ran more smoothly ... However, I was not prepared for the style of learning, and an introduction to this would have been useful.

Initial enthusiasm for learning can be quickly thwarted by unfortunate early encounters with technology. While problems related to local infrastructures are perhaps difficult for distance institutions to address, tutors can support students by providing helpful information prior to registration about the kinds of hardware, software, technical skills, and knowledge required to undertake the programme. With hindsight, making available an online precourse assessment of skills might have been beneficial to some students, enabling them to gauge their readiness for online learning. Introducing students to the new styles of learning before or during induction could also be facilitated through the designing of appropriate activities so that students become technically oriented, discover key functions, and ascertain how online tasks can be performed.

Students' Needs as Online Distance Learners

Students were asked to identify what they perceived as their needs as distance learners commencing a programme of online study so that these could be contemplated by tutors who could then consider how these needs might be met during induction.

As anticipated, students gave an assortment of responses indicating different types of needs. One type related to communication:

> Easy access to both administrative and academic staff, knowledge of who to contact about specific queries, and fast replies and feedback.

> I feel access to a "human tutor" is the greatest need.

> We need a tutor that cares about her/his students. We need to be in contact just not to feel isolated.

For some students, their needs were connected to having appropriate information:

> A clear knowledge of how the programme works in practice.

> Understanding of how to borrow books from [the University library]; access to, and participation in, the various discussion forums.

Understanding what is expected of you, both from the procedural point of view as well as the content one.

Another kind of need identified related to having a sense of identity as a student within a particular institution and fostering a sense of belonging to that institution:

> Some means of experiencing a sense of belonging to an institution that is 3,000 kms away.

This is probably the most difficult aspect to achieve with students who are studying at a distance. However, establishing social presence (see Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Stacey, 2002) and integrating students so that they feel they belong to the programme (and are part of a student body within the wider university) is important, and arguably facilitates successful progression through the programme.

In comparison, the students studying the same course on campus identified different learning needs. They defined their needs in terms of developing face-to-face communication skills through intercultural training, requiring guidance in using CMC and assistance in improving their basic study skills.

Students' Relationships with Fellow Students

Other human elements emerged from the data; namely, students' relationships with fellow students. For some students the perceived solitude and insecurity of learning alone by distance was combated by their optimism about the possibilities for online interaction and also reassurance gained from their participation in, and observation of, the online forums. One student stated:

> It was pretty important to know that there were people out there who were feeling the same thing ... It was a little bit scary. I was thinking can I do it; can't I do it? ... This might sound a little bit perverse, but it was reassuring to know that other people were feeling the same thing; that it was quite normal.

However, students may still be perplexed by the nature of the electronic classroom and attempt to reconstruct the more familiar learning environment. For example, one student revealed how he "missed the face-to-face contact" of the real classroom

and although he used the forum to introduce himself to the group found "it didn't really substitute the face-to-face contact that I am used to". He was also attempting to comprehend the composition of his peer group:

> I am not sure exactly who is actually on the course yet. I assume most people have written the first comment using the forum, although that might not be the case ... it's not like in a classroom where you would physically see 12 or 15 people, but I would only be able to guess at how many people are on the course.

Another student claimed she was a visual learner who needed "to imagine the person I'm talking to" and suggested that "a photograph might come in handy here" as well as enabling her to decipher the gender behind "foreign names". Another female student demonstrated a shortfall in the information provided by her lack of understanding of the purpose of the forums; she was unclear about the social norms of this unfamiliar setting:

> I am not really sure of the intended function of forums in this academic context—are they for general thoughts or are they for discussion? What style of language should be used? Do I have to participate?

Without adequate guidance, students may inadvertently find themselves in Wegerif's (1998) terms "outsiders" and without any sense of collaborative group involvement or support. However, much is dependent upon how much students wish to or are able to commit themselves to forging an online relationship and, like any other social relationships, these can take time and effort to meaningfully develop. The "social presence" of a student, recognised as important in the online teaching and learning environment (Garrison & Anderson, 2003), can be facilitated by tutors who encourage and provide opportunities for students to participate online. Indeed, as part of their induction activities students are invited to make forum postings whereby they introduce themselves to their peers. Yet while the construct of social presence has been proposed in the literature, explored as a means of understanding student–student and student–tutor interaction, and recognises that online relationships are perhaps inhibited by the absence of visual gestures, the degree of social presence achieved by students is often dependent upon external circumstances. One student recounted the difficulties of managing work, home life, and studying, and then finding time to socialise and network online with other learners, claiming:

> We all probably have other priorities. So although it [communicating online] would be good, realistically how far can we do it?

According to Eastmond (1995), distance relationships are temporary and are unlikely to last beyond the duration of the programme, and virtual relationships are unlikely to replace the social relationships and networks that students have in the real world. This point is borne out by the comments of another student:

> Contact with the other students wasn't terribly important because I have got friends here who are doing Masters degrees with other universities and I can talk to them about things.

Electronic Communication and the Role of Tutors

Electronic communication technologies facilitate the constantly available learning environment, which students can utilise use at their own convenience. We found students perceived they had access to tutors at any hour, 7 days a week. For some students commencing their distance studies it was some consolation that they could email tutors day or night, as these comments typically exemplify:

> With tutors, I was grateful to have access; 24 hours email access.

> The contact with tutors was more important for me than contact with other students.

Interviews with tutors revealed that asynchronous electronic communication had indeed facilitated dialogue and interaction with students. However, tutors also reported that the rapidity of electronic communication has raised student expectations of faster responses from them, the demand for prompt feedback, and more efficient institutional practices. Tutors suggested that many students expect their postings and queries to be answered very quickly and this sometimes is difficult for tutors to manage alongside their face-to-face teaching commitments as well as dramatically increasing their workloads. One tutor explained:

> It's very difficult to organise your workload during the week ... the amount of traffic that comes in, maybe not for every tutor, but certainly I feel I can log on very early in the morning at home, come to work, log on again. Evening, I do it before I go home, and then I go back home and then I might be logging on again. And I can be clearing emails which have to do with distance learning at each of those points during the day. Personally, I tend to get drawn into that because I don't like to have a load of unfinished business ... Email has provided us with opportunities to provide more effective support ... But at the same time ... it's an opportunity and it's a threat ... I suppose it is just challenges of the system for a tutor when you are juggling those types of things.

The asynchronous medium that facilitates "any-time, any-place" (Marjanovic, 1999) communication has, in the minds of some students, unwittingly given rise to the notion of the "24–7 tutor" who is perceived as being available to respond to student communication at any hour when students are studying. Having a sense of the social presence of the tutor appears to be particularly important for new students in the establishment of a secure learning environment. The tutor's role, however, requires sensitive management by tutors themselves, so that students' expectations of communicative responses are located at a realistic level from the outset of their studies.

The Development of Online Learning Communities

Tutors were keen to encourage a community of online learners while at the same being conscious that suggesting students introduce themselves on the forum, make postings, and participate with unfamiliar technology might be intensely challenging for some, causing anxiety, awkwardness, and even being counter-productive. Ideally, the role of the online community is perceived as enabling the development of a

supportive peer network, bridging the gap between the social and academic lives of distance students, and facilitating collaborative and interactive learning. The effectiveness of an online community where membership is voluntary, however, largely depends upon its attraction to students, the perceived advantages of participation, and the aims and goals of those who contribute to it. One student forthrightly admitted that she had initially "feared" the online environment and having to "introduce myself and discuss initial ideas about distance studies with peers on the various forums". Another stated quite frankly:

> The reason why I didn't use [the forum] very much for the first module was that I found it a little bit intimidating. Some contributions were so, what I call, erudite and I thought, "Gosh, no way could I react to this question or whatever the stimulus was". So I did find it not terribly encouraging ... what other people had written sounded so much more informed than what I'd actually got round to reflecting on.

Such experiences can be disconcerting for students. However, for others it may be quite positive, as indicated by this particular student who refers to her experiences of the first module:

> There seems to be a lot more encouragement to share ideas and discuss them, both through forums and MOO chat sessions. This has helped me to evaluate my learning and also feel personal attention.

Another distance student felt particularly encouraged by involvement with a virtual learning community:

> I really do feel that I am part of that community and I have felt better as the course has gone on. At the start of it, it was a bit of a strange feeling, but now I feel very good about the whole thing.

Another student, however, considered "the potential was there, but in reality it didn't happen", while one suggested that as a distance learner she did not feel it necessary to be part of a community:

> The reason for me doing the Masters is purely a selfish thing that I'm actually doing it for me. So it wasn't so essential to feel that I am part of a study group or a student community to be quite honest.

Students thus appear to have different perceptions of the value of an online learning community. Since the research participants belong to the same cohort, we consider that the existence of an online learning community largely depends on the extent of students' involvement in it and the sharing of common events. While tutors may seek ways to promote active participation, encourage collaboration, and design purposeful tasks, contributions are voluntary and so students who are reluctant to interact in this way (or circumstances take them away from their computers) will not feel any sense of community. If the development of a virtual community is favoured by distance educators, then induction design should seek to support its development. Ground rules, protocol, and expected social norms should be apparent. The benefits of engaging with the community should be outlined and its purpose made transparent (i.e. whether participation is social or academic) so that students regard

participation as an important and/or enriching source of learning rather than a burden or triviality.

In contrast to the distance students, campus-based students reported a relatively low amount of interactivity and discussion using the online forums, preferring to capitalise on their opportunities for communication in their face-to-face sessions. However, computer-mediated communication and interaction featured extensively for the students studying at a distance and, of course, online, where in some cases being part of an electronic learning community augmented the educational experience of many distance students; these findings are reminiscent of other studies (e.g., Armatas, Holt, & Rice, 2003).

Implications for Online Teaching and Learning

The growing popularity of online distance courses has various, although interconnected, implications for students, tutors, administrators, and for teaching and learning per se. Current trends suggest that student numbers are likely to continue increasing and, potentially, students will fall between two types—those who are information and communication technologies adept and have previous experience of online learning, and those who are complete novices. Within our own cohorts of M.Ed. students, there are many such differences between students even though they might share certain characteristics (e.g., being English-language teachers). One of the challenges for distance educators is being able to properly meet the various needs of different students as they begin their online studies. Arguably, students' introduction to pre-online distance education did not offer any differentiation, and induction (if it existed) typically followed a "one-size-fits-all" approach that was essentially static. However, the various features afforded by a Web-based learning environment offer students the opportunity to select induction activities, retrieve resources, utilise software tools, and combine these as required in a "pick-and-mix" fashion, which can be tailored according to personal need. A significant implication for online teaching and learning is that the nature of induction can be controlled by the student to a greater extent and even used by students independently. The responsibility for learning also falls more on the learner as a result, and the tutor's role is that of a "guide" who provides information, tasks, and activities, and facilitates a range of possible routes through the induction process, providing assistance where required. The amount of time to become familiar with the online environment could, however, be significantly under-estimated by students. As with any process that involves students interacting with materials it will need to be tutor-supported, and striving for differentiation according to varying student needs will inevitably add to tutors' workloads.

Distance educators who have previously written paper-based materials and/or taught face-to-face are increasingly developing and/or adapting teaching material for online delivery by personal choice or as an institutional requirement. This shift from paper-based and cassette-based materials requires that tutors undergo appropriate training in order to gain a fundamental understanding of the potential for teaching and learning in an online environment. There should be familiarity with available

tools, an awareness of which approaches work well online, and knowledge of appropriate online teaching methods. Some appreciation of students' needs and abilities is essential for course design and development. How courses are delivered online requires consideration, as does the embedding of induction to such courses. An initial module may be desirable whereby students receive a thorough overview of the systems and proper practice at using the technologies deployed, as well as understanding what is required of them academically.

In terms of tutors' time, the induction of online distance students requires at least the same amount of preparation as for campus-based induction. It is not just a case of tutors ensuring that all the appropriate information and induction activities are available online. Induction preparation also involves deciding the best mode of delivery, where to house and how to present materials for easy access, and at what point these need to be available to best support rather than overwhelm the new online distance student. Devising relevant online activities and enabling orientation also requires careful consideration so as to assist and not inadvertently hinder the student. It is crucially important that students do not feel overly burdened with information at the beginning, but equally are not uninformed. Timeliness of information delivery is thus crucial and induction need not necessarily be regarded as occurring only at the very beginning of online study. Salmon (2000, p. 72), for example, suggests induction to online studying "requires a staged but extensive process, to be undertaken online" and that carefully structured activities acclimatise students to their new learning environment. Attending to any student enquires asynchronously, however, might also stretch over several days, as opposed to a face-to-face induction session where queries may be resolved in a matter of minutes.

Distance programme administrators who have previously managed pre-online systems require appropriate training in managing new technologies so that they can offer technical support to students and have some appreciation of the difficulties new students might encounter. In terms of economies of scale, some information that new distance students require is relatively generic in nature and so there is the potential for online student induction across a number of programmes to be provided at a single point for questions that are of a more technological nature relating to the virtual learning environment, or the library for example. This may also be conceived as saving time and workload for individual administrators and tutors. General information about an institution, its surroundings, and student life is now typically provided by universities via Web pages and these can be a valuable resource for campus-based and distance students alike. Administrators should ensure that the online induction is evaluated regularly and adjusted according to the perceived needs and experiences of learners.

Recommendations for Supporting the (New) Online Distance Learner

As a result of this research we have learned much about students' experiences as online learners. While, as mainly English-language teachers, these M.Ed. students might be perceived as representing a particular subset of distance learners, they are

like any other distance learners in that they have diverse needs as individuals, different learning styles, and preferences. They thus have different induction needs, as would any one cohort of distance students. We consider that the following recommendations are thus generically applicable to different cohorts of online distance learners whether or not they are professional course students. The provision of induction for online learners is advantageous in that it enables students to select and access what they need from appropriately designed menus and networked computer-based materials. We offer these recommendations that online distance educators might take into account when contemplating the nature of induction to online distance programmes and for supporting the (new) online distance learner:

- Clearly define the technical requirements for the programme, the prerequisite skills of the learner, and any special requirements for participation.
- Acquaint students with the requisite communication tools (e.g., online forum) so that they can access, enter, and navigate the online community and fruitfully participate within it during their induction and beyond.
- Provide guidance and advice for studying online and at a distance (e.g., developing a productive study routine, managing and organising time, adopting appropriate learning strategies).
- Make a pre-course assessment of students' technological skills so that these can be appropriately evaluated and honed. Students can then feel comfortable when using the technology.
- Provide detailed step-by-step guidelines on how to access the course units, the forums, library catalogue, ejournals, ebooks, and databases.
- Give a sense of what it is like to learn online using appropriately selected activities and enabling students to practise; for example, accessing course unit materials and navigating the sites.
- Encourage, monitor, and support online chat and threaded discussions via the provision of tasks using these functions.
- Ensure students know exactly whom they need to contact should they require technical, academic, or pastoral support.
- Conceive online induction as an ongoing process that helps integrate students to distance learning and higher education and a process that facilitates successful progression with online studying. Online induction need not necessarily be regarded as a one-off event or a series of short-term introductory activities.

Conclusion

This study explored students' needs and expectations of becoming online distance learners and examined their experiences of induction to online programmes. Fundamentally, an understanding of students' needs and of their initial encounters with online distance education is important to ensure effective support is provided for students as they commence their studies. The research highlighted students' concerns and anxieties, giving programme directors and tutors a more comprehensive

understanding of students' engagement with online distance learning. We consider this important because the more that is known of how students experience the induction to programmes, the better the influence over the learning process can be. The data generated through this research identified a number of areas whereby recommendations could be made in order to provide a more effective and relevant induction and to better meet the needs of students. These were subsequently operationalised as appropriate for the next induction period.

With the increasing use of technology to deliver courses to campus-based students as well as to distance learners, what we have learned from a study like this is equally as important for our face-to-face students as it is for those who already study at a distance. However, we consider that more student-centred studies exploring online distance learning are needed to assess how students manage the transition to online learning, how they perceive their initial online tasks, what strategies (if any) they adopt, and how the appropriate use of technology and pedagogy could enhance distance programmes, benefit students' learning, and enrich their educational experience. A greater understanding of the learners' experiences and the online learning environment that information and communication technologies facilitate will enable distance educators to maximise the technology and enhance the potential for learning.

Notes on Contributors

Gary Motteram is a senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Manchester, UK.

Gillian Forrester is a Research Associate in the School of Education at The University of Manchester, UK.

References

Armatas, C., Holt, D., & Rice, M. (2003). Impacts of an online-supported, resource-based learning environment: Does one size fit all? *Distance Education, 24*(2), 141–158.

Brace-Govan, J., & Clulow, V. (2000). Varying expectations of online students and the implications for teachers: Findings from a journal study. *Distance Education, 21*(1), 118–135.

Burge, E. J. (1994). Learning in computer-conferenced contexts: The learner's perspective. *Journal of Distance Education, 9*(1), 19–43. Retrieved November 26, 2003, from http://cade.athabascau.ca/vol9.1/burge.html

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dearnley, C. (2003). Student support in open learning: Sustaining the process. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 4*(1). Retrieved February 2, 2004, from http://www.irrodl.org/content/v4.1/dearnley.html

Dirr, P. J. (1999). *Putting principles into practice: Promoting effective support services for students in distance learning programs* (Survey report). Retrieved January 12, 2004, from http://www.wcet.info/projects/studentservices/Survey%20Report.pdf

Eastmond, D. V. (1995). *Alone but together: Distance study through computer conferencing.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Evans, T. (1994). *Understanding learners in open and distance education.* London: Kogan Page.

Evans, T. (1995). The potential of research with students to inform development. In F. Lockwood (Ed.), *Open and distance learning today* (pp. 67–75). London: Routledge.

Fung, Y. Y. H. (2004). Collaborative online learning: Interaction patterns and limiting factors. *Open Learning, 19*(2), 135–149.

Garrison, D. R. (1992). Critical thinking and self-directed learning in adult education: An analysis of responsibility and control issues. *Adult Education Quarterly, 42*(3), 136–148.

Garrison, D. R. (1993). A cognitive constructivist view of distance education: An analysis of teaching–learning assumptions. *Distance Education, 14*(2), 199–211.

Garrison, D. R., & Anderson, T. (2003). *E-learning in the 21ˢᵗ century: A framework for research and practice.* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Gibbs, G. R. (2002). *Qualitative data analysis: Explorations with NVivo.* Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Gibson, C. C. (1990). Learners and learning: A discussion of selected research. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), *Contemporary issues in American distance education* (pp. 121–135). New York: Pergamon Press.

Hara, N., & Kling, R. (2000). *Students' distress with a Web-based distance education course: An ethnographic study of participants' experiences.* Retrieved October 30, 2003, from http://www.slis.indiana.edu/CSI/wp99_01.html

Hodgson, V., & McConnell, D. (1995). Cooperative learning and development networks. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 11*(4), 210–224.

Howland, J. L., & Moore, J. L. (2002). Student perceptions as distance learners in Internet-based courses. *Distance Education, 23*(2), 183–195.

Kenworthy, B. (2003). Supporting the student in new teaching and learning environments. In A. Tait & R. Mills (Eds.), *Rethinking learner support in distance education: Change and continuity in an international context* (pp. 53–63). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Krauth, B. (1999). Trends in support services for distance learners. In M. Beede & D. Burnett (Eds.), *Planning for student services: Best practices for the 21ˢᵗ century* (pp. 13–17). Ann Arbour, MI: Society for College and University Planning.

Laurillard, D. (1993). *Rethinking university teaching: A framework for the effective use of educational technology.* London: Routledge.

Lockwood, F. G. (1992). *Activities in self-instructional texts.* London: Kogan Page.

Marjanovic, O. (1999). Learning and teaching in a synchronous collaborative environment, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 15*, 129–138.

McConnell, D. (1992). Computer-mediated communication for management learning. Cited in T. Nixon, & Salmon, G. (1996). Computer-mediated learning and its potential. In R. Mills & A. Tait (Eds.), *Supporting the learner in open and distance learning* (pp. 88–100). London: Pitman.

Mills, R., & Tait, A. (Eds.). (1996). *Supporting the learner in open and distance learning.* London: Pitman.

Morgan, A. (1984). A report on qualitative methodologies in research in distance education, *Distance Education, 5*(2), 252–267.

Morgan, A. (1990). Whatever happened to the silent scientific revolution? Research, theory and practice in distance education. In T. Evans (Ed.), *Research in distance education 1* (pp. 9–20). Geelong Vic., Australia: Deakin University Press.

Morgan, A. (1991). *Research into student learning in distance education.* Geelong, Vic., Australia: Deakin University Press.

Morgan, A. (1992a). *Improving your students learning.* London: Kogan Page.

Morgan, A. (1992b). Theorising adult change and development through research in distance education. In T. Evans & P. Juler (Eds.), *Research in distance education 2* (pp. 81–88). Geelong, Vic., Australia: Deakin University Press.

Morgan, A. R. (1995). Student learning and student's experiences: Research theory and practice. In F. Lockwood (Ed.), *Open and distance learning today* (pp. 55–66). London: Routledge.

Morgan, C. K., & McKenzie, A. D. (2003). Is enough too much? The dilemma for online distance learner supporters. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning.* Retrieved February 2, 2004, from http://www.irrodl.org/content/v4.1/mckenzie_morgan.html

Morgan, A., & Thorpe, M. (1993). Residential schools in open and distance learning: Quality time for quality learning? In T. Evans & D. Nation (Eds.), *Reforming open and distance education* (pp. 72–87). London: Kogan Page.

Nipper, S. (1989). Third generation distance learning and computer conferencing. In R. Mason & A. Kaye (Eds.), *Mindweave: Communication, computers and distance education* (pp. 63–73). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.

Nixon T., & Salmon G. (1996). Computer-mediated learning and its potential. In R. Mills & A. Tait (Eds.), *Supporting the learner in open and distance learning* (pp. 88–100). London: Pitman.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2003). *The virtual student: A profile and guide to working with online learners.* San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Picciano, A. G. (1998). Developing an asynchronous course model at a large, urban university. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 2*(1), 1–14. Retrieved November 26, 2003, from www.aln.org/publications/jaln/v2n1/pdf/v2n1_picciano.pdf

Poole, D. M. (2000). Student participation in a discussion-oriented online course: A case study. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education, 33*(2), 162–177.

Richardson, J. T. E. (2000). *Researching student learning. Approaches to studying in campus-based and distance education.* Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Robertson, B. (1987). Audio teleconferencing: Low cost technology for external studies networking. *Distance Education, 8*(1), 121–130.

Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (1999). Assessing social presence in asynchronous text-based computer conferencing. *Journal of Distance Education, 14*(2), 50–71. Retrieved March 1, 2005, from http://cade.athabascau.ca/#vol14.2

Rovai, A. P. (2001). Building a sense of community at a distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3*(1). Retrieved February 2, 2004, from http://www.irrodl.org/content/v3.1/rovai.html

Rowntree, D. (1990). *Teaching through self-instruction: How to develop open learning materials.* London: Kogan Page.

Salmon, G. (1998, September). *Student induction and study preparation online.* Paper presented at the Telematics in Education Seminar, Joensuu, Finland. Retrieved February 23, 2004, from http://www.atimod.com/presentation/download/finland2.doc

Salmon, G. (2000). *E-moderating. The key to teaching and learning online.* London: Kogan Page.

Schifter, C., & Monolescu, D. (2000). Evaluating students' online course experiences: The virtual focus group, *DEOSNEWS, 10*(9). Retrieved November 26, 2003, from http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deosnews/deosnews10_9.asp

Schrum, L. (1998). Online education: A study of emerging pedagogy. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 78*, 1.

Somerville, M. (1998). Keeping them going: Supporting distance learning students. In W. Wade & S. Hunt (Eds.), *Current Issues in Distance Learning Conference* (pp. 105–120). Loughborough, England: Audio Visual Services Loughborough University.

Stacey, E. (1999). Collaborative learning in an online environment. *Journal of Distance Education, 14*, 2. Retrieved March 1, 2005, from http://cade.icaap.org/vol14.2/stacey.html

Stacey, E. (2002). Quality online participation: Establishing social presence. In T. Evans (Ed.), *Research in distance education 5* (pp. 138–153). Revised paper presented at the 5th Research in Distance Education Conference, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia.

Tait, A. (1995). Student support in open and distance learning. In F. Lockwood (Ed.), *Open and distance learning today* (pp. 232–241). London: Routledge.

Tait, A. (2000). Planning student support for open and distance learning, *Open Learning, 15*(3), 287–299.

Wegerif, R. (1998). The social dimensions of asynchronous learning networks. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 2*(1), 34–49. Retrieved November 26, 2003, from http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/v2n1/v2n1_wegerif.asp

Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, T., & Whitelock, D. (1998). Monitoring the online behaviour of distance learning students. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 14,* 91–99.