Towards the design of a decentralized support system for online learners (Proposal Feedback ID 493)

Olabisi Kuboni

University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago

olabisi.kuboni@dec.uwi.edu

INTRODUCTION

With the shift towards a blended learning/asynchronous delivery mode in the distance programme of the University of the West Indies, the existing learner support system can no longer meet the needs of learners who must now do a large part of their study online. A key component of the old system is the network of local sites/centres that have performed functions consistent with the conventional distance delivery mode. With the onset of online tutoring, many of these site-based functions are either difficult to perform or no longer apply. Some may argue that, given the web-based management tools that are now available, a decentralized organizational structure may no longer be necessary. While in theory this may be so, current evidence does not completely support this option for the UWI distance student. This paper will therefore examine the factors that seem to suggest a need to retain a visible people-based learner support structure at the local level, at least in the medium term. On the basis of that examination, the paper will make proposals for a revised localized student support system.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

The current organizational structure for distance education in the University of the West Indies has been in place since 1997 when the UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) came into being. This structure conforms to the requirements of the conventional distance education delivery mode, one important feature of which is the local centre that serves as an intermediary between the student and the central institution. In the UWIDEC context, there are some thirty sites spread across the sixteen English-speaking countries of the Caribbean that support the University of the West Indies. Since the inception of UWIDEC, these sites have been performing such functions as receiving and distributing course materials; organizing local tutorials; monitoring tutor performance; receiving and submitting assignments for grading; collecting mark-sheets from tutors for forwarding to course coordinators; distributing examination cards, receiving and posting final examination results. Above all of this, the site coordinator has performed the important role of orienting students to distance learning and supporting them as they pursue their studies.

As indicated above, with the onset of online tutoring, many of the existing site-based arrangements are either unsuited to the new delivery mode or are no longer applicable. Tasks related to the selection, appointment and monitoring of tutors is one such example. Previously sites would advertise for and identify potential tutors for subsequent appointment by the institution. With online delivery, the entire advertisement, selection and appointment process is done centrally. Moreover, there is no longer a need to have tutors for every course at every site. Thus it is often the case that there are very few or no tutors at some sites. Similarly, many of the functions associated with the administration of examinations no longer reside in the site.

There is the view that this downplaying of the role of the local site may have contributed to students feeling of being disconnected. Even though students are organized into small groups of twenty to twenty-five for online tutoring purposes, many express the view that they do not feel that they are part of a group. The sense of social cohesion that such an arrangement is intended to foster does not seem to materialize in their online learning experience.

It is against that background that this paper seeks to explore the possibility of a revised role for the local centre/site as the ‘human face’ that serves as the intermediary between the institution and the student, now studying online.

The paper will first outline some new student support functions that are currently in effect at some sites as described by the site coordinators themselves. In that context, it will also address issues that appear to be blocking similar operations at other sites. It will then report on a student survey that was conducted to get students' perceptions of themselves as online learners. Finally, the paper makes a proposal for a revised student support system at the level of the local site/centre in light of data presented from both the site coordinators and students' perspectives..

SUPPORTING THE ONLINE LEARNER AT THE SITE: SOME NEW INITIATIVES

Interviews were conducted with seven site coordinators in three countries. The interviews were semi-structured and basically asked respondents to speak freely on four areas: what type of student support they provided to online learners, how they provided it, why they provided it and when they provided it, (that is, with what frequency). While this framework was intended to govern all the interviews, in at least one instance, an adjustment had to be made to accommodate one interviewee who considered it important that her concerns be highlighted. Those concerns will be outlined at the end of the section.

One function that several of the interviewees identified can be described as *getting students' questions answered and/or their problems solved.* In some cases, students would turn to the site coordinator when, as they claimed, there was no response to messages either posted in the online learning forum, or e-mailed to a tutor or the helpdesk. Students would therefore ask the site coordinator to intervene to get a response from a tutor to a question posted some time earlier. Other requests may be to find out when grades for a particular learning activity would be released, since the due date had passed. Students would also seek out their site coordinator when they needed to query the accuracy of a grade, entered in the Student Administration System.

The typical channels used for sending these requests to the site coordinators are the telephone and to a lesser extent, email. One site coordinator said that once she received the solution to the problem from the relevant source, if she felt that other students in the same course group also experienced the problem, she would email the solution to all students registered in the same course.

Several site coordinators would also *send brief announcements and reminders.* In some instances, it would appear that site coordinators would retrieve the relevant information from the course websites, for example, a change in the submission date for an assignment or the deadline date for a quiz, and make this information available to students. When questioned further about the reason for this practice, one site coordinator explained that it was important to do this, either because some students do not log on often enough to get the information themselves in a timely fashion, or because students do not always notice information posted in the course website. Announcements would also be sent when there is a change in the date for a teleconference or to inform students of a face-to-face tutorial; a limited number of both are still part of the current blended delivery mode.

The main medium used for making announcements is the telephone. When asked about email, given the fact that the institution has provided all students with an email address, the site coordinators claim that many students do not use the email. In a few cases, a site coordinator would send the announcement using the email lists and follow up with telephone calls. Another site coordinator reported that given the large number of students at the site, her staff used text messages to send these notices.

Sites also provide a range of *technical services* as requested by students, either face-to-face or via the telephone. These services include advice about acquiring a home system, troubleshooting a problem with an existing system, having a quiz reset when difficulties of one type or another arise during an attempt, determining the location of a discussion forum posting that is not where it is supposed to have been posted. Technicians at the sites appear to spend a lot of time assisting

students uploading assignments. Students are encouraged to come to the sites to perform this task if they think they are likely to encounter problems on their own.

Some site coordinators actively facilitate the *formation of on site self-help study groups*. They view this feature of the conventional distance delivery mode as still being beneficial, in particular for courses with a mathematical underpinning. One site coordinator reported that a Level 2 student was assisting Level 1 students in an Accounting course that she had already completed. The more usual situation is that students doing the same course would meet to work through problems together. In such instances, the site will make available a room and other requirements such as a whiteboard and markers.

Sites also *assist with online registration procedures.* Even though students are free to register anywhere and at anytime, some of the site coordinators reported that a sizeable proportion of students still use the site's computer facilities for this purpose. Whether at the site or elsewhere, members of site staff receive requests for assistance with registrations – usually that students are trying to register for courses that do not appear on the menu available to them. One site requires all its students to register at the site to ensure that the process runs smoothly for all.

Finally, there is *counseling*, done face-to-face. Site coordinators report that they are approached by students who often say that they want to drop out because they are unable to combine the amount of work that study requires with their other responsibilities. One aspect of the online learning experience is the continuous assessment that is a feature of all courses. Students are required to undertake compulsory graded learning activities at regular intervals. While learning activities were always embedded in the course materials in the traditional delivery mode, students did not normally pay attention to them and tutors did not necessarily insist that they were to be done. Site coordinators are therefore required to address the issue of the management of time and workload with students.

Not all the site coordinators interviewed discussed the matter of support for students in the manner described above. While two of them may have undertaken one or other of the above tasks from time to time, the dominant feeling was that, with the advent of online tutoring, students no longer saw the site as their point of contact. According to one of them, previously students relied on the site more; they trusted the information they received from the site. Nowadays, they 'do their own thing'. Now that they have the use of email, they write directly to the campus-based senior staff and the local sites have lost the control they previously had. Students only used the site as a last resort, when they did not get their problems solved by going directly to the Centre.

WHAT STUDENTS' PROFILE SUGGESTS ABOUT THEIR NEED FOR SUPPORT

As indicated earlier, a survey was conducted among students to get a sense of their perceptions of themselves as online learners and in particular of their capability to manage their learning. The survey comprised a questionnaire consisting five (5) questions seeking demographic information, thirty nine (39) closed items and one open-ended question. A subset of respondents was also interviewed. The questionnaire was administered to Level 1 students pursuing a distance degree in four supporting countries namely Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Dominica and St. Lucia. For convenience, students enrolled in two courses were mainly targeted. Level 1 students were targeted since they would have recently completed orientation to online learning courses prior to enrolling in their credit courses.

Out of a possible 260 students, 169 or 65% completed the questionnaire. Table 1 provides demographic data of the respondents. The questionnaire was administered towards the end of Semester 1, 2007-2008.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

		Count	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	31	18
	Female	138	82
	Total	**169**	**100**
Age	20 years and under	11	7
	20-29 years	102	60
	30-39 years	38	22
	40-49 years	16	9
	50 years and over	2	1
	Total	**169**	**100**
Frequency logging on to online course websites	Less than once per week	8	5
	Once per week	12	7
	Twice per week	35	21
	Three times per week	29	17
	More than 3 times per week	85	50
	Total	**169**	**100**
Time spent online on each visit	Less than one hour	38	23
	Approx. 1 hour	68	40
	Approx. 2 hours	45	27
	Approx. 3 hours	6	4
	More than 3 hours	11	7
	Total	**168**	**100**

Of interest in these data is that a substantial proportion of respondents fall in the age bracket 20-29 years. Also of interest is that some 67% of respondents indicated that they logged on three times or more per week.

The closed items of the questionnaire loaded on to the factors identified in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Results of factor analysis

Factors	**Reliability**
Perform basic online classroom tasks	0.80
Employ study strategies	0.76
Process information	0.74
Interact to learn	0.79
Access additional resources	**0.59**
Apply technical skills	0.68
Build social relationships	**0.62**
Overall online learning ability	0.74

The first five factors were generated from items that required students to rate themselves, using a 5-point scale, on items that reflected various activities that someone studying online would engage in. Their response indicated the extent to which they felt that they were engaging in each activity. The last three factors were based on items that looked at students overall behaviours in the online environment; these items were rated on a three-point scale and indicated whether

students considered them true about themselves. Table 3 lists selected factors with their related items.

Table 3: Selected factors with examples of related items

Selected factors	Some related items
Perform basic online tasks	I make my postings match the name of the discussion forum. My contributions online are helping to build group spirit.
Apply technical skills	You access your online course websites easily. You upload assignments without problems You word process essays and reports without difficulty You regularly use links to search other websites
Build social relationships	You send emails regularly You have made friends in your online group You have regular exchanges with your tutors
Overall online learning ability	You like studying online You are becoming a better student by studying online

A t test conducted on all constructs showed that the mean value observed for each was significantly different from the maximum possible value. Overall students tended not to assign a high positive rating to the statements that loaded on to the factors. (Tables 4a, 4b)

Table 4a: T-test of Section 1 - Test Value =5

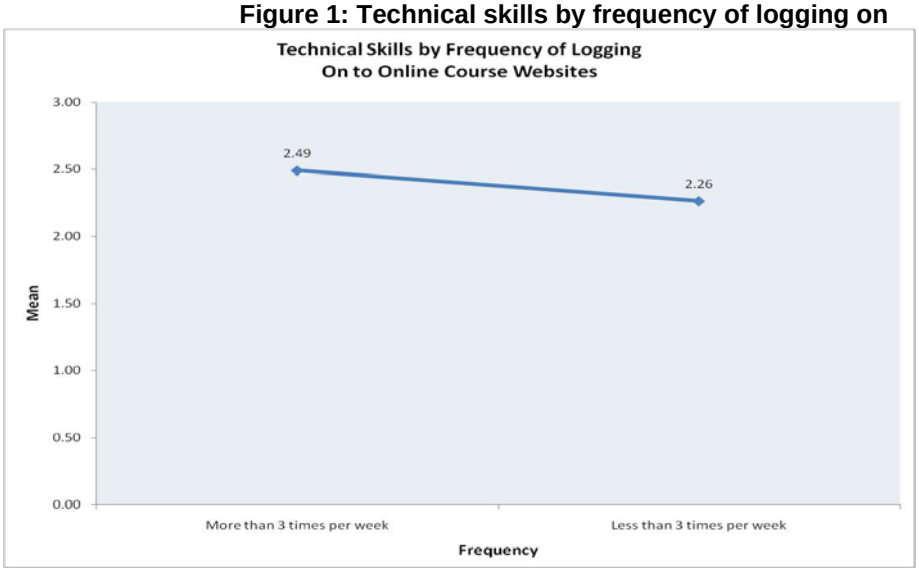
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Perform basic online classroom tasks	-33.39	168.00	0.00	-2.15
Employ study strategies	-23.74	168.00	0.00	-1.17
Process information	-29.37	168.00	0.00	-2.14
Interact to learn	-16.77	166.00	0.00	-1.72
Access additional resources	-18.20	166.00	0.00	-1.52

Table 4b: T-test of Section 2 - Test Value=3

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Apply technical skills	-18.08	157.00	0.00	-0.59
Build social relationships	-37.49	157.00	0.00	-1.40
Overall online learning ability	-24.88	157.00	0.00	-0.98

When examined more closely, one way ANOVA showed a significant difference in terms of technical competence between those who logged on more than three times a week and those who did so less than three times a week (F1, 156=11.76, p=0.001). This result suggests that one becomes more comfortable with the technology the more frequently one interacts with it. (Figure 1).

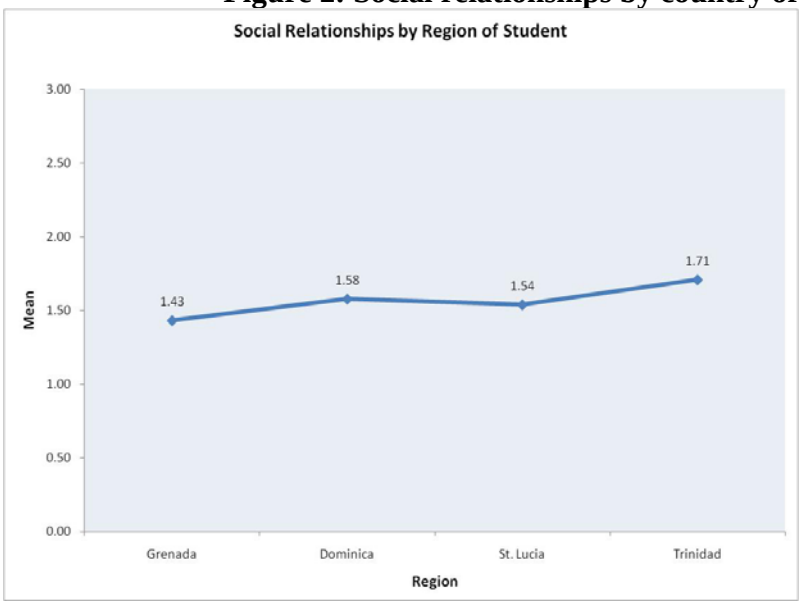
Figure 1: Technical skills by frequency of logging on



(F1, 156=11.76, p=0.001)

In terms of building social relationships, there were significant differences among countries, with respondents from Trinidad and Tobago appearing to be the most competent in this area (F3, 154=2.86, p= 0.04).

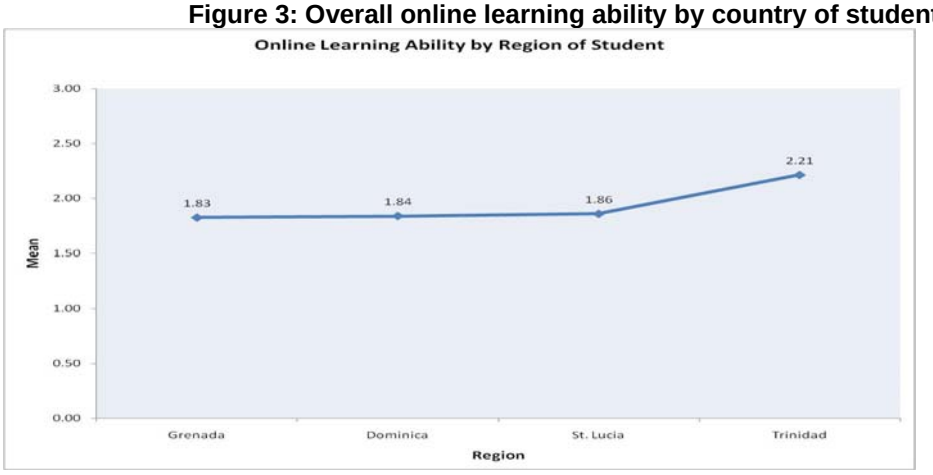
Figure 2: Social relationships by country of student



($F_{3, 154}$=2.86, p=0.04)

Trinidad and Tobago students also stood out above students from other countries as far as overall online learning ability was concerned (F3, 154=8.30, p=0.00).

Figure 3: Overall online learning ability by country of student



($F_{3, 154}$=8.30, p=0.00)

STANDARDISING AND ENHANCING THE STUDENT SUPPORT ROLE OF THE SITE

As indicated earlier, not all the site coordinators interviewed were following a clearly defined approach to supporting the online students attached to their sites. The reason for this may lie in the inadequacy of the communication from the campus-based coordinating team. It is likely that the new tasks were not articulated as clearly as they should have been. In that regard, the activities that characterize the current practice of some site staff, as described above, can serve as a basis for formalizing this aspect of the support role of site staff.

Having said that, one is also aware that it is possible to have a more direct communication between students and the institution. I would argue however, that given the overall lack of confidence and competence among students, as suggested by the questionnaire results, and the fact that delivery systems may not always function as efficiently as they should, the intermediary facilitating role of the site coordinator and other site staff needs to be maintained at least in the medium term, and appropriately adjusted to meet the demands of the still somewhat insecure online learner.

While not minimizing the importance of the tasks outlined above, I would argue that the role of the site must go beyond that of ensuring that students' queries and concerns are efficiently dealt with. The four factors singled out in Table 3 above represent tasks that provide important support in the overall learning process. These are the tasks that collectively determine whether one can consider oneself as being a capable functionary in the environment; these capabilities serve as a platform to support learning at a higher level in the online classroom. For example, if one is not sensitive to the role of labeling in the discussion forum, or if one has persistent problems uploading a document, or if one does not develop a facility for using links to do online searches, then one's capacity to manage one's learning as conceptualized in the student questionnaire will be seriously compromised.

It should be noted that these skills were all addressed in the various orientation courses offered to incoming students. However, based on the questionnaire results, it would appear that there is

need to provide opportunity for students to build these skills over a sustained period of time rather than in a single event. In that regard I am proposing that the site coordinator and staff be given the responsibility for building and maintaining a 'learning space' in which students can continue to develop their online learning skills at their own pace, outside of the more time-bound examination-oriented learning management system.

EXPLORING THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES AS A STUDENT SUPPORT TOOL

In looking towards the creation of these site-maintained 'spaces', one may wish to explore the possibility of using and/or adapting social networking websites. Even though their current use does not completely meet the student support requirements discussed in this paper, they offer a more relaxed atmosphere that can allow students to build their capability for functioning in an online environment. Purposes for which the space may be used include,

- Linking to sites where students can upgrade their ICT and other pre-requisite skills
- Building FAQs
- Sharing of information (general, personal) using various media
- Scheduling of self-help study group activities
- Posting of blogs
- Building special interest groups

Overall it is envisaged that skills developed in this environment can feedback into and enhance the formal learning experience.