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Tutors as learners: overcoming barriers to learning ICT skills

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of ICT to provide distance training for UK Open University (OU) Associate lecturers (ALs) and identifies the range of outcomes and issues which emerged. There is an increasing demand from many of our students for the University to provide more facilities and functions (both administrative or course-related) online or by electronic mail. To this end the University has attempted to increase the awareness of these computing-related issues with ALs by offering various methods of increasing ICT skills. One programme involved a contingent of ALs participating in an online short course. This paper will summarise some of the qualitative feedback along with the quantitative results in order to establish whether this course did indeed assist in tutors gaining some new computing skills. Furthermore, tutors made many additional comments about the process of learning and the experience of being a learner. Many of the issues raised were found to be important when designing a programme of study for those who take courses as a form of staff development.

Key words: tutors as learners, ODL, ICT skills, staff development

Staff development of tutors in the Open University

The Open University has a well-established programme of staff development for its 7,500 part-time tutors, which begins at appointment and extends through a programme of induction to continuing professional development. Part time tutors are supported in a number of ways: through written materials, for example folders on Supporting Open learners, practitioner Toolkits on issues like Equal Opportunities; through meetings both within one of the 13 regions and at the central site in Milton Keynes; through visits and assignment monitoring from Line Managers; and through regional and online networks of colleagues.

The commitment of the Open University to the staff development of tutors has recently been recognised by embedding staff development within a new tutor salary and contract.

Two of the key national documents for tutors from induction are the Supported Open Learning (SOL) Reader [1] and a Teaching Toolkit entitled 'How do I know I'm doing a good job?' [2]. The Reader contains much practical advice on issues for new tutors and also establishes a constructivist framework for learning and development which encourages tutors to be interested both in their own subject and in the process of their own and their students' learning: 'being interested in your own learning is an excellent foundation for facilitating your students' learning' (SOL reader p. 125). Key to this is the development of tutors as reflective practitioners, following Kolb's learning cycle or a revised spiral: 'Reflection is the core process for effective professional learning'; 'Just as we encourage our student to reflect regularly on what and how they are learning, so we as tutors should reflect regularly on the experience of what we do and how our students react' (SOL reader p. 114).

The TU170 project aimed to provide the opportunity for tutors both to gain skills and to reflect on the experience of being a student.

Staff development in the East of England

The East of England region of the Open University has a well developed tradition of staff development for the 750+ tutors in the region and our contributions in this area were recognised by the award of an internal Teaching Fellowship, which has helped fund this project.

Wright [3] identifies eight assumptions which underpin his definition of staff development as 'the process of personal development of a tutor through tutoring for the OU'. These have been influential in the East of England and contributed to our staff development principles and programmes. Of particular relevance in the context of this paper are his first assumption: that 'the ultimate purpose of staff development is to improve the *student's experience* of studying with the OU' and assumption 5: that theories about teaching and learning should be consistent with those we hold about staff development.

'One implication of this assumption is that the principles and practices of learning which have been developed to promote student learning...are equally applicable to tutors as learners (and, indeed, to staff

developers as learners). Therefore the notion of tutor-centredness as a mirror of student-centredness is crucial in staff development activities' .

Wright's approach to staff development has contributed to five principles which underpin regional staff development activities. These are cited in our regional *Guide to staff development for Associate Lecturers* (2001-2) pp3-4, developed by Bailey and others. These emphasise (1) that (staff development is a continuing process for all staff , (2) informed by feedback from tutors; (3) it is essentially collaborative and (4) provides a model for the variety of approaches and media used by tutors to help students to learn. Finally (5) the evaluation of staff development contributes to our quality assurance processes.

The TU170 project was informed by all these assumptions and principles: as noted above in the summary, changes in the delivery of OU courses, demand from students and more general changes in society have led to increased need and demand for higher levels of ICT skills among tutors (1 and 2). The collaborative nature of the experience (3) was underpinned by the involvement of two members of Regional Centre staff with different Faculty and Staff development perspectives, as well as the appointment of a tutor from among the Associate Lecturers who was highly experienced both in ICT skills and in supporting students online, thus drawing on tutors' experience and expertise.

Studying the course also gave tutors the experience of being a student again, often in an unfamiliar area, and thus modelled the kind of experience their own students would have (see Wright's assumptions above and 4). Finally, tutors were paid a small fee to complete evaluations of their experience of the course, to inform both our and their future practice.

TU170: the course

The short course TU 170 *Learning online: computing with confidence* [4], is primarily aimed at level 1 entry university students and covers email, computer conferencing, word processing, web browsing and web page creation as well as introducing three main skills: group working, learning to learn and clear thinking. In this section an overview of the course specification is presented, in order to clarify the aims, the teaching and learning strategies, and how we adapted the course to meet our staff development needs. Our AL group demographics is also described along with how the course was presented.

The course aims to develop the following basic aims which are summarised in Table 1. The course was designed to provide entry level students with the knowledge and understanding of computer basics, such as mouse, keyboard, menus and files.

Table 1: Broad learning outcomes of the 12 week on-line course (TU170)

<ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Basic computer skills including use of windows and file managementb) Use of email and computer conferencingc) Word processing use of spreadsheets, databases and graphicsd) Web browsing and creating web pagese) Understanding the theory and practice of group-workf) Skills of learning to learng) Skills of clear thinking (including note taking)

From the practical (and professional) applied skills a student who successfully engages in TU170 should be able to

1. use email as a communication tool
2. use office software packages
3. use computer conferencing
4. create a web page

It was felt that these four practical skills could be useful for our own Associate Lecturers, and thus we began to investigate if this course could be run for a 'dedicated' group of OU ALs. Clearly, there were parts of the course which would be irrelevant for the majority, or even all, of the ALs – components such as the cognitive skills needed to analyse and evaluate information from a variety of sources, or take notes on various materials. Although some ALs remarked that this was an interesting section of the course (see later, this paper), for the majority this section could have been omitted. Due to time constraints, and the dedicated nature of this web base course, it was not possible to remove any unnecessary content. Thus from the outset, we, as the staff developers tried to ensure that the ALs understood the course content and the aim of taking the course. For some this was not entirely clear, as there were queries about the assignments and the fact that this course constituted 10 points under the University credit status system. The assessment is briefly outlined below.

TU170 has 2 assignments, the first of which is weighted to a much lower extent in order to allow a more 'gentle' start to the course during the first 6 weeks of course. The second assignment is during the final week of the course and pulls together many of the strands learned over the entirety of the course. The assignment must be submitted in the form of a web-page (i.e. as an html document) which the students upload into an assignment handling system. Thus the assignment serves a two-fold purpose – to see if the students have covered the material under discussion in the task at hand and also to create a working html document with appropriate external and internal links. Furthermore, the course requires that the students actively engage in the online media through the use of online polls, self-assessment tests and via contributions to their individual tutor groups. Participation is then verified by the tutor.

The course is broken into 4 sections which are effectively 3 weeks each in length where the student is expected to spend about 6-8 hours per week studying. The sections are entitled (1) Joining the online world, (2) Effective groupwork online, (3) Computing with confidence and (4) Web skills. Note that the four sections mirror the practical learning outcomes listed above.

Associate Lecturers: the group

Nearly 10% of all our tutors volunteered to take the course as a group, although most had not met each other before, and were supported by another tutor – one of their peers but highly experienced both in ICT skills and in supporting students online. This was thus a multi-faceted form of staff development; the tutors aimed to develop their ICT skills and experience again the pressures and enjoyment of studying an OU course [5].

Associate lecturers were from nine different faculties and had a wide variety of background experience, with an average teaching time with the University of just over 11 years. The tutors were asked to contribute feedback formally twice during the course. The feedback was collected in the form of pre-posted questionnaires which were sent twice during the course – once before the course formally started and once again after the last assignment was due. The ALs were remunerated with a small fee for completing the questions and taking the time to reflect on the issues they had encountered during the course. The questionnaires are shown in the appendix.

In the case of this specific programme the ALs were purposely put into a designated group (e.g. a corporate group) – in other words the ALs were not mixed in with the typical student cohort. There are arguments from either perspective about whether this is entirely appropriate or not. Mixed groups allow the chance for ALs, in the role of a student, to see and react with typical students – similar in many cases to their own students. An AL in a mixed group, especially in an online course, has the ability to 'hide' their identity to some extent – other students need not know their fellow student is in fact also a tutor. In the AL-only group (which is the option investigated and reported on here), the group members can share their wide teaching experiences, and have much in common already. They will have all taught for the University in some capacity and be aware of open support distance learning issues. Most of them were involved in tutoring courses which had no, or very low levels of computer-mediated communication such as email contact with students, or knowledge to access some course related materials on a website.

An additional benefit of having an AL-only group was that the tutor was able to relate the experience of the course to tutors' own teaching and encourage 'students'/colleagues to reflect on their work as an OU tutor. When there had been few contributions to online discussion for a while, for instance, he would prompt his colleagues by asking them how they encouraged students to contribute if they had a quiet group.

One change which was significantly different, to a typical student cohort of TU170, was that the AL-only group did get extra face-to-face (F2F) tutorial time. Usually this is limited to 2 hours per student group, but in the case of ALs as staff engaged in coursework it was felt that increasing this to 6 hours was justified. Thus instead of one initial tutorial, the dedicated group received 3 sessions – 1 at the course start, and 1 each approximately 1 week before each assignment due date. ALs have consistently remarked how useful they find F2F meetings for staff development and this programme was no exception.

Questionnaires: design

The two questionnaires were designed with several purposes in mind. We wanted:

1. To gain an informal audit of the ICT skills need among tutors.
2. To gain feedback on how far this was an appropriate method of meeting that need.
3. To gain feedback about the course content and its suitability for tutors.
4. To encourage tutors to reflect on their teaching and how the course relates to their role as a tutor.
5. To encourage the tutors to reflect on their own learning through studying the course.

The first three points were largely to inform our future plans, and for feedback to the University nationally. Points 4) and 5) above were more developmental in intent.

The structure of the questionnaire was also intended to encourage reflection on tutors' own teaching and learning. 'Learning' can be defined as 'an interactive process whereby experience is transformed and outcomes are created in the form of changes to people's knowledge, attitudes and practices' [6] and the evaluation aimed to prompt reflection on these three areas. Both questionnaires contained explicit questions about the application of knowledge/skills gained to teaching practices (1.9: How might you apply the skills used in this course to your work with students?; 2. 6: How might you apply the new skills or experience of study you have gained in this course in assisting your work with your own students?). 'Before' and 'after' competence grids highlight changes in competence and skills. Both questionnaires also invite discussion of attitudes and aimed to encourage tutors to reflect on their confidence in the subject as well as their competence (1.6 Are you particularly concerned or worried about any of these areas? 2.5 How did you feel about studying with other associate lecturers?). Further questions also asked them to reflect on their own development and that of others (1. 8: By what criteria will you assess that this course has been of help in your development as an OU tutor? 2. 7: What advice would you offer to other Associate Lecturers considering taking this course?).

The pre-course questionnaire was comprised of approximately 9 questions but focussed on the three main strands which are described later in this paper. The self-assessment questions asked each person to categorise their own competency in eight distinct areas, by using 4 levels of competency – very competent, competent, some competence and no or little competence. Only five of the eight areas of computer mediated skills are to be presented here: email, word processing, computer conferencing, web browsing, and html [7]. An example of this self-assessment grid is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: A self-assessment for a skill level competency for a particular aspect of computing

	Very	Competent	Some	None
email				
word processing				
first class				
computer conferencing				
web browsing				
html				
virus detection software				
file management				

Grids like this were used before the course was taken and after the course was completed. Respondents were also asked to say how often they used the following skill areas based on a simple working scale of daily, weekly, occasionally or rarely/never. By comparing the self-assessed skill level and the frequency some interesting patterns emerge.

The post-course questionnaire aimed to again assess the competency in the selected skill areas, but to also gain qualitative feedback about the learning experience. Thus the questionnaire was much shorter and more open-ended in approach. These comments were collected in order to attempt to make our staff development events more tutor-focussed but also in order to improve the course presentation pattern by the use of feedback to the course team. Feedback and comments were then summarised from the first group and given in limited quantities to the second group – in this way tutors received recent and pertinent feedback about other experiences. Limited sampling of the comments was used since a full sampling may have prejudiced what tutors new to the course might have thought.

In these ways the evaluation was intended to be of value both to us and to the tutors concerned though the three staged model of reflection applied by Boud and colleagues to professional development programmes [8] returning to experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluating the experience.

Questionnaires: response

A number of open questions invited tutors to comment freely about a particular area and we also invited any general comments at the end – which were extensive. The aim was not to lead the tutors to particular responses but to allow them to comment as they wished. Some tutors left some sections blank or gave

equal weighting to more than one area so the figures below do not add up to 100%. They do however, give some idea of relative importance of particular issues, and once again some distinctive patterns emerge.

Overall the detail and thoughtfulness of response provided by tutors is a real tribute to their commitment to their own development and their concern to help their students in the most effective ways. We encouraged tutors who withdrew or who did not enjoy the course to complete evaluations as well as those who were successful, so the questionnaires do cover a range of responses although it may be that we received more from those who gained something from the experience. From the outset we explained to the tutors that this was a new initiative which had attracted national OU interest and so we valued their responses whether positive or negative.

Only a portion of all the polled information can be shown here, but this nevertheless shows clearly the value and effectiveness of engaging in course related activities as a form of staff development. The grids show a clear shift in the students' own perspective of how well they could achieve certain tasks. Not surprisingly, most were already competent in the use of email and word-processing before the course began, but after the course was complete most ALs moved 'up' in their competence in all most categories. Analysis of skills development and learning and teaching development is included in the next section; this section covers some of the other responses.

1. **The Pre-course questionnaire** (see appendix for full details)

50 questionnaires were completed.

Why are you studying the course?

Unsurprisingly, the main reason given for studying the course was to improve computing skills. 36/50 i.e. 72% explicitly noted this; 'I wanted to fill the gaps in my self-taught computer skills' was a typical response. A smaller number 10% gave this an affective rather than the cognitive slant and emphasised increasing confidence: 'to improve my confidence with computers'. A further 11% related the course to their role as tutors: 'it may offer new ways of guiding/supporting students'.

Are you particularly concerned about any of these areas?

18 i.e. 36% had no concerns about any of the skills listed. A range of other skills were noted as causing some concern: in order of most frequent mention these were: html, multiple, time, conferencing, FirstClass, file management, virus detection.

By what criteria will you assess that this course has been of help to you in your development as an OU tutor?

Given the main reasons for studying the course it is unsurprising that the main criteria cited were an increase in skills and confidence: 82% mentioned this explicitly. 'If the course makes me more confident and competent in dealing with email and conferencing and the web, I will be able to use these facilities more efficiently.' Several also mentioned specific ways in which it might help them as a tutor: 'ability to provide elementary instruction and advice to students on using ICT where appropriate'. Some tutors (8%) had already identified the experience of being a student as one of the key outcomes (see later for further details).

Key issues in electronic communication

OU tutors are very aware of the digital divide with 30% citing access issues as key. Other issues included time needed and security/data protection issues – clearly a concern for those who work from home. Technical difficulties in the use of the medium were also noted as were issues relating to the nature of the medium: 'Quality of the message especially in terms of distortion through tone and syntax in email'; 'the ease with which messages can be misunderstood! The difficulties of 'feeling' the 'tone' of a message'. Given that OU tutors are highly skilled at giving written feedback on assignments, and electronic media used here are text-based, this may reflect anxieties about potential loss of other media: 'the loss of face-to-face or telephone-to-telephone contact' or recognition of the differences in speed and style of CMC.

2. **The post-course questionnaire** (see appendix for full details)

31 questionnaires were returned, 15 from the first group and 16 from the second group.

We asked tutors to consider whether the course had met their expectations with the aim both of encouraging them to revisit their expectations and experience (see Boud et al above) and to gain feedback for the course team and the staff development working group about how effective this course is for this purpose.

Fourteen (45%) tutors said that it had met their expectations and in some cases exceeded them: 'Yes – I can produce a web-page, which I wanted to learn, I can surf the net (hardly ever done this before), I am more confident generally'. Nine (29%) said that it had not, the main criticisms being the amount of time required, the sharp learning curve towards the end, and from a few, that it was too advanced: 'it was too advanced for my existing level of knowledge and competence. My expectations were also unrealistic'. Eight tutors (25%) said yes and no: 'Yes, in that I now feel much more confident than I did about using my computer. No, in that it actually took me a lot longer to do than I ever imagined'.

Question 4 asked about the beneficial aspects and most difficult aspects of the course and these produced a wide range of thoughtful comments.

Broken down into key areas it was interesting that the best bits included all the areas we identified earlier as part of learning: confidence, ICT skills and knowledge and understanding and reflection.

Responses, categorised by main area(s) noted, were:

Confidence building:	7	(23%)
Skills/knowledge building:	22	(71%)
Reflection/understanding:	8	(26%)

'Gaining more confidence about trying things out for myself, because there was a supportive environment' 'Getting to grips with email, FirstClass and computer conferencing'; 'Creating a web page: I have learned skills which were completely new to me'.

The most difficult parts of the course also varied between cognitive and affective issues, with the main categories being:

Time needed:	12	(39%)
Website design:	10	(32%)
Access/technical problems:	8	(26%)

'Not being able to work ahead of the set pace: this made things quite difficult towards the end because the course required the most work when I had little free time.'

'Producing a web page in a very short space of time, to a deadline, when working with the uncertainty of computers'

'the sheer frustration of trying to get software programs to do what I expected/hoped/wanted'. 'Couldn't always access FirstClass'; 'problems with software – especially getting started'.

How did you feel about studying with other associate lecturers?

As indicated above there are arguments on both sides of the issue but our tutors, with two exceptions, generally welcomed the idea and found it supportive. The two exceptions felt embarrassed about exposing their ignorance in front of colleagues but mostly tutors commented very favourably.

'great! Given a rare opportunity to work with ALs from other faculties – my colleagues are great, but it is really positive to work beyond.'

'This I liked – particularly working and discussing with those from other disciplines'.

'Very encouraging when I discovered others were having the same problems as myself'.

What advice would you offer other Associate lecturers? The following quotes were used from various groups (whom had previously studied the course) in order to give potential ALs some direct feedback about what the course entailed.

- Don't underestimate the time needed [to do the course]
- Time needed and patience and make sure [you have] good technical support!
- Don't be put off by many e-mails
- (You need to) get into the habit of being on-line
- Use the help lines [and] Persevere - it [frustration] doesn't last for ever!

Questionnaires: analysis

We hoped that the study of *Learning Online* and the associated questionnaires would have several outcomes both for us and for the tutors involved (see Evaluation above, objectives 1-5). There follows a brief discussion of these outcomes and how far they were achieved.

Skills development

1. An informal audit of ICT skills need:

Clearly there was a great deal of interest in the programme and a great demand for skills development in particular areas. The desires were polled in the initial questionnaire by asking the tutors to place the main four skill areas (email, web pages, software packages and conferencing) in a ranked order. The results are shown in Figure 1, where total responses per category are plotted. The rank of 1 has been transcribed as most important, or relevant, followed by quite, some and least important rankings. The figure clearly shows the strong need from ALs to learn more about conferencing being prioritised as most important for the first 2 categories. There is some error in this analysis, and this has not been corrected, but is due to some participants ranking the four skills as 1, 1, 2, 2 instead of assigning each skill a separate rank. This leads to some minimal double-counting which has not been adjusted for, at this time. For example, at the most important level use of email and conferencing as within 1 'vote' of each other and thus both have been starred (marked with an asterisk) as a leading concern in Figure 1.

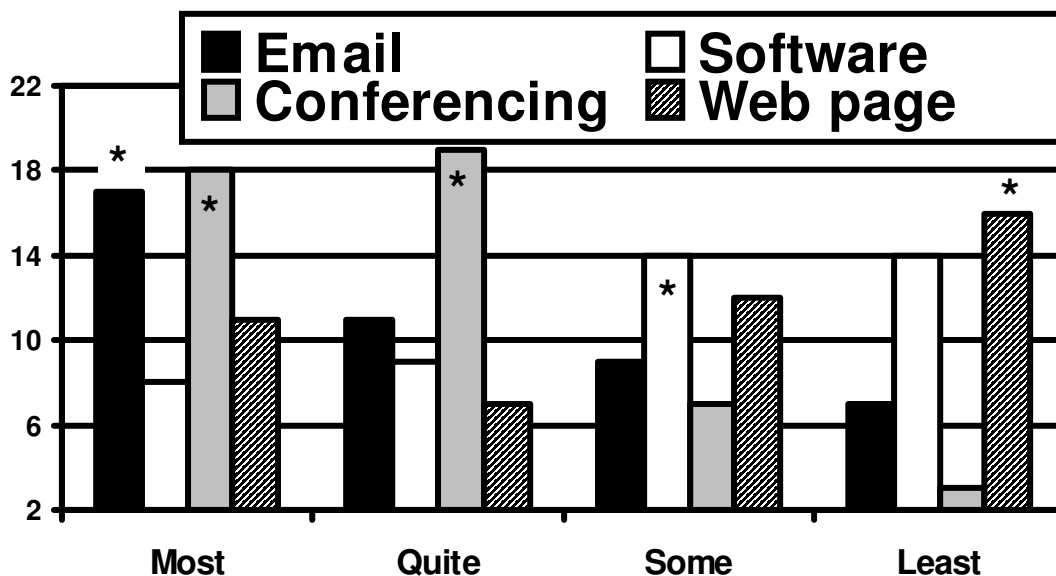


Figure 1: The number of responses for the 4 main ICCT skills as a function of importance. Skills marked with (*) represent those with highest response level from Question 3 of the initial questionnaire.

Second most important was conferencing followed by use of office software packages. Least important was the 'create a web page' choice, showing a high number of responses being linked to ranking no. 4. It seems clear then that those taking part in this staff development exercise were mainly interested in learning how to use email effectively, along with conferencing, partly in order to support their own students within their own designated tutor groups. Some ALs did note that they would certainly consider putting some of their own tutorial materials on the web in order to facilitate supporting their own students.

Further to the desires of the course we also asked ALs to indicate to us which types of ICT skills they used on a daily, weekly, occasional or rare (rarely/never) basis. This frequency of usage was carried out to see if there were any strong correlations between frequency and competency. How often do you use the following – the frequency query – was only asked in the pre-course questionnaire. The headings under the self-assessment grid were categorised as very competent, competent, some competence and no/very little competence. When the two data sets are combined some interesting patterns emerge.

These patterns are shown in Figure 2 which shows a plot of frequency as a function of competency.

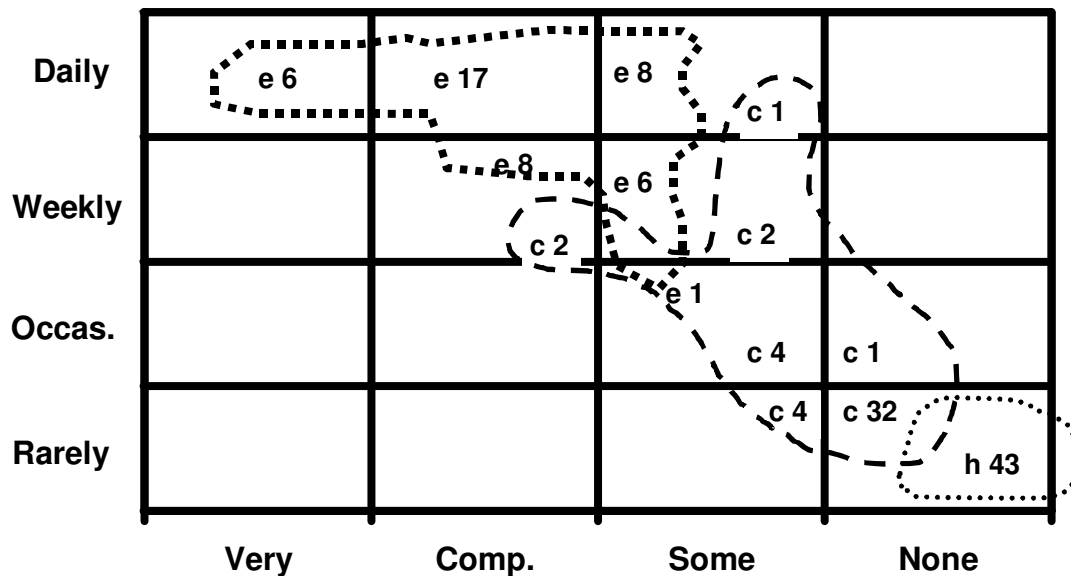


Figure 2: The level of frequency (of use of a certain skill) as a function of self-assessed competency (4 levels) for the use of electronic mail (e), conferencing (c) and html (h). The number of responses is shown in each block and the lines are merely shown as a visual aid. In the case of (h) some responses lie outside of the grid if the respondent did not know what the question asked.

It should be noted that although the variables may be linked they are certainly not directly dependant on each other and that the graphic could be plotted in other ways. The plot shows the clusters for three skills – namely email (e), conferencing (c) and use of html (h). The numbers next to the initial indicate the number of responses for that ‘grid’ category. For example, h 43 is located in the rarely/none grid, which means that 43 respondents (all that replied) said they rarely/never used html, and not surprisingly had no competence in the skill of web creation. Similarly the plot shows a strong cluster for conferencing where most people felt they had no skills and rarely used conferencing. The conferencing cluster however is much more spread out than the html subset with responses into the competency area. Also the frequency stretches into the daily and weekly areas but no-one felt that they were very competent. Lastly the use of email gives an interesting subset of responses with all ALs using email at least on an occasional basis but typically much more frequent than that. The largest group (e 17) were located in the competent-daily users with smaller groups around that area including competent-weekly, some competence-daily or weekly and also 6 who felt that they were very competent (daily usage). There do appear to be some strong correlations between high frequency usage and higher self-assessed skill levels and vice-versa. Understanding something about these connections can only help in devising more appropriate ways to tailor our various staff development exercises to the needs and desires of our associate lecturers.

2. How far was this an appropriate method of meeting the needs of the Associate Lecturers? We attempted to measure an increase in competence and awareness of the various skills ALs were engaged in on the course by asking them to complete self-assessment grids before and after the course. These were then compared in order to see if ALs felt they had improved their ICT skills base significantly. Again the ALs were requested to categorise their skill level in each of the eight main areas, but in this paper the five major skills are shown grouped together. These were use of email, conferencing, word processing, web browsing and html.

As in Figure 1, the figures have not been corrected for the differing response levels received for the pre- and post-course questionnaires. In other words, there were many more responses in the initial survey than in the final one due to some of the respondents either not replying or having dropped out of the course. This has been partially corrected by taking the sum of all responses and ensuring it is identical pre- and post-course, but further work is needed to subtract those responses which did not complete the second survey. The full results, for the five skills, are shown in Figure 3, a plot of number of responses as a function of self-assessed competency for before and after the TU170 course.

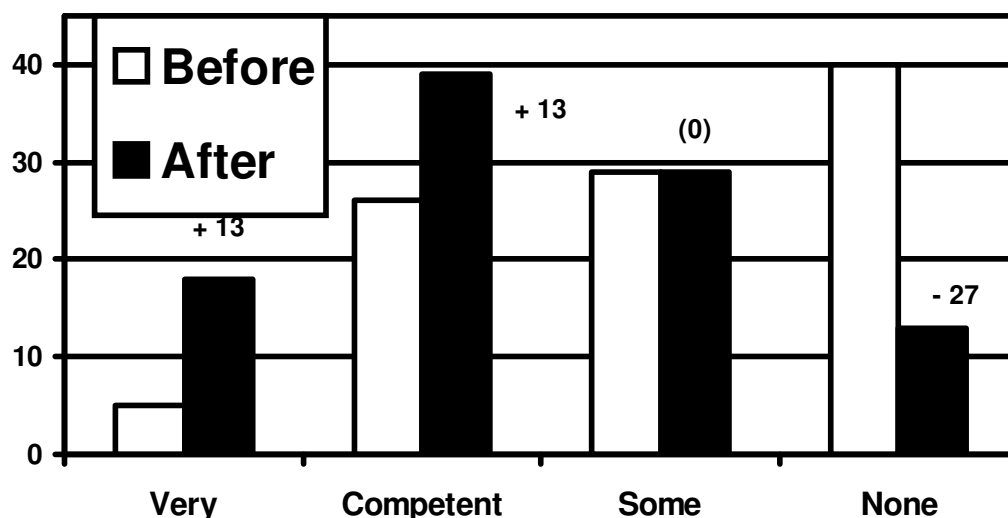


Figure 3: The number of responses (shown as a percentage) for the 5 main ICCT skills (see text for full description) as a function of self-assessed competency for those queried before the course start (white bars) and those at course completion (black/filled bars). Values show the percentage increase (or decrease if negative) from the 'before' to the after condition; total values do not sum to 100 due to rounding errors.

In both the very competent and competent categories skills were increased by 13 responses. In the very little or no competency category there was a corresponding decrease of 27 responses. Note the discrepancy of 1 response. The some competence was unchanged. This is an indication that according to the ALs who completed the survey that their skills did in fact increase during the course period.

3. Feedback on the course

In general, only minor changes have been made to the roll-out of the 'corporate group', following on from the advice of both AL feedback, as well as tutor requests. These enhancements, along with their justification, are listed here –

- A fuller briefing about what TU170 is about, and why it can be useful to engage in course work in terms of Staff development. Many ALs didn't even realise they were enrolled on an academic course, although this was noted in writing (and by voice in F2F sessions) on multiple occasions. The briefing included a caution to all about sections of the course which are mostly redundant for ALs (e.g. basic critical reading & note taking skills), and emphasising the nature of assessment within the course.
- An increase in F2F sessions (3 in total) instead of 2 previously – note typical students in R06 get 1 session, and most regions have no F2F sessions. These were deemed very useful in terms of ALs getting over the assignment hurdle, and for meeting people in a cross-faculty atmosphere.
- Previously, an emphasis was placed on taking the course in order to increase their IT skills, and this was and is a major driver for many taking this course, but other outcomes which may not have been expected were found in the completed forms from May. Thus for the November presentation, IT skills and PC skill assessment, although polled in an identical way to May, was not emphasised as a means to the end, or the sole reason for taking the course. ALs were left to decide why they had taken the course, but they were also given a limited sampling of some of the previous group's comments about the course.
- A stronger consideration when organising coursework for those that tutor courses – we found that many ALs were struggling to complete their assignments – not surprising as they were trying to mark their own students' work as well.

Learning and teaching development

4. Reflection on teaching and how the course related to role as a tutor

Tutors cited many practical ways in which the course would help them in their role as tutors: some, as noted above, took the course partly for this reason. Both questionnaires encouraged tutors to reflect on

the teaching implications, with the question 'How might you apply the skills used in this course to your work with students?'

Before the start of the course, responses emphasised the application of skills gained. Two areas dominated the evaluation: emails and conferencing; while help with research and better handouts were briefly mentioned. 28% mentioned improvements in their use of email: 'more regular and effective use of email to respond to student requests for help with assignments and to contact those who cannot attend tutorials'; 36% cited conferencing: 'greater and more effective use of conferencing'; 'computer conferencing could be very useful especially for those who don't/can't come to tutorials'.

Responses to the post-course evaluation covered a wider range of practical and theoretical perspectives. Three tutors felt it had not been particularly relevant to their teaching and three related to future courses in their own faculty. The more general comments included the following.

- More use or more effective use of emails (8 comments)
'Definitely in emails to students and in organising emails into folders. I am also intrigued by the possibilities for working with students who cannot get to tutorials, either because they live in rural areas or because of personal problems'.
- Use of conferencing (9)
- Improved materials and handouts (5)
- Overcoming distance (4)
- Web pages
- Improved access to research
- Increased empathy with students (4)

Tutors thus seemed to have gained a broader understanding of the relevance of CMC to their future tutoring.

A number of tutors also commented specifically on their facilitator as an excellent role model: 'All tribute to our wonderful tutor- an excellent role model, relaxed and approachable, yet clear in objectives. Also pertinent questions about tutoring are raised in conferences which was thought provoking'; 'he stimulated and helped when necessary, but also let us work things out between ourselves. It is good to see things from a student's view again'. Our choice of an experienced colleague to tutor the course seems to have had broader outcomes than we had foreseen: tutors welcome the opportunity to observe and reflect on a colleague's teaching practice and learned from this experience.

5. Reflection on own learning through studying course

One of the key principles underpinning our staff development for tutors (see above) is that of modelling. Tutors became students again and studied a range of new skills, much as their own students do when studying their courses. The fact that this was undertaken in an online (and relatively unfamiliar) medium does not invalidate this experience; Alexander and Boud argue that 'most of what we know about teaching and learning is applicable in all learning environments, including online. ...given the nature of the medium, it is particularly productive to view online learning as examples of students' learning from experience' [9]. Reflection on their own learning experience can thus inform tutors' teaching of students in the future. Salmon has noted that for effective e-moderation, 'tutors truly needed to experience, much as their own students would, the pitfalls and the potential of CMC' [10]. Most of our tutors had no immediate requirement to teach online, so the outcomes are much broader and relate to the wider student experience.

Some tutors (8%) recognised this learning potential before the course started and identified the experience of being a student as one of the key outcomes of taking the course: 'insight into being a student of the OU, clarity of material, time spent, help etc'; 'the ability to see the problem from the student's perspective'; 'will I view my students' efforts in a different light as a result of my own student experience? – I am expecting so!'

A larger number of tutors noted this in the post-course questionnaire, where many commented on the benefits of revisiting the student perspective again, especially if they encountered difficulties. Several noted they would be 'even more sympathetic about lack of time'. Other comments include: 'It was good to have been a student and to be challenged by something I found difficult and frustrating and that gives me sympathy with my students'.

'A reminder to me about what it feels like to struggle and fail to understand – it should help me to be more sympathetic and supportive to students who feel alienated by the subject matter'. (Noted as a positive point!).

'I carry very vivid memories of what it feels like to struggle with something which does not come naturally and with which I am getting nowhere despite hours of effort. This is something I shall hold on to when I am trying to help students who are struggling.'

Conclusions

This programme of study for tutors has met many of our main objectives for at least some of our tutors. Competence in ICT skills clearly increased and tutors also gained considerable insights into being a student again, with outcomes for their own teaching. This will, when put into practice, fulfil one of our main aims for staff development in that it will lead to improvements in the students' experience (Wright [3]).

There are valid arguments that a specially developed course more targeted to the particular skills needed by a tutor (e.g. facilitating group discussion online) may be more relevant to our part-time staff. On the other hand, the particular strengths of this programme were that tutors were studying a student course, modelling the student experience, and hence able to gain valuable insight into this experiential process.

The questionnaires record changes in some tutors' knowledge, evidenced by their increased competence; attitudes, demonstrated by increased confidence; and practice, illustrated by the application of their learning to their teaching of students. This indicates the full range of learning outcomes as defined by Edwards and Thorpe [6]. Clearly this does not apply to all those on the programme, some of whom had considerable difficulties with the course because of time constraints or for other reasons; a few found it a largely negative experience. Difficulties, however, were not always regarded in an entirely negative light because of the student experience gained. The second group of tutors were also able to benefit from the experience of the first and so enjoyed more face-to-face support which was greatly valued and contributed to a higher pass rate among the group. Passing the course, however, was not the main objective for many, as one long-serving tutor noted in a letter of withdrawal:

"I signed up hoping that it would get me onto the computer and out of the Stone Age. This it has most certainly done – I have experience of graphics, spreadsheets, I can look around on the web, and I understand something of HTML. I've had some experience of what it's like to be a student...All these things have been very worthwhile. I am sure it will make me a more effective and thoughtful tutor."

In conclusion, there seems to be some evidence that this programme has been of value to some of our tutors, and their students, both in ways we intended and in more personal outcomes.

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[2] How do I know I am doing a good job?, Open University Teaching Toolkit by P Hewitt, H Lentell, M Phillips and V Stevens, (1997), The Open University, ISBN 0 7492 73569.

[3] Wright T (2001) 'Towards a holistic view of staff development of regional tutorial staff at the Open University', *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, vol 14, no 6, December 2001.

[4] The course TU170 can be reviewed at the following URL <http://www3.open.ac.uk/courses/bin/p12.dll?C01TU170> which is the University's Course and Qualifications main website.

[5] This project was financially supported by both the Open University's Teaching Fellowship Award, presented to our regional Staff Development Working Group and funded by the UK's HEFCE but also by the Faculty of Technology, who authored and presented the course, and helped fund some of the tuition.

[6] Edwards R and Thorpe M (1993) *Learning through life: education and training beyond school*, The Open University EH266 Learner's experience, bk1, p. 11.

[7] The three other skill areas which have been omitted, for brevity, are the use of file management, virus protection software and FirstClass – which is a software product made by Centrinity. FirstClass, which is not presented here, but simply offers a means for people to access electronic mail and electronic based conference systems.

[8] Boud, D Keogh R and Walker D (1985), *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*, Kogan Page

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Appendix:

The pre-course and end-of-course questionnaires are shown here in full. Note the copyright of these and the paper is held by The Open University. Some spaces have been removed for clarity.

TU170 Questionnaire # 1 of 2 – “Pre Course”

The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain information about the usefulness of the new TU170 course as a form of staff development in ICT skills.

1. Name:

Course tutored:

Length of time as an OU tutor:

2. Why did you decide to study TU170?

3. The course provides opportunities for you to develop the following professional and practical skills. *(Please rank from 1-4 which of these skills you are most interested in developing - 1 being the most important and 4 the least).*

1.1 Use email as a communication tool

1.2 Use office software packages

1.3 Use of computer conferencing

1.4 Create a web page

4. How often do you use the following?

I use.....	every day	weekly	occasionally	rarely or never have used
email				
word processing				
first class				
computer conferencing				
web browsing				
html				
virus detection software				
file management				

5. Please assess your current competence in these areas

	Very competent	Competent	Some competence	No/very little competence
email				
word processing				
first class				
computer conferencing				
web browsing				
html				
virus detection software				
file management				

6. Are you particularly concerned or worried about any of these areas?

7. Is this the first time you have taken an OU course?

8.1 At level 1

Yes

No

8.2 At Undergraduate level

Yes

No

8.3 Ever

Yes

No

8. By what criteria will you assess that this course has been of help in your development as an OU tutor?

9. Please add any additional comments about your study of TU170 (on a separate sheet if relevant). For instance:

At this point: what do you think are the key issues in electronic communication?

How might you apply the skills used in this course to your work with students?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please return in the enclosed pre-paid envelope

TU170 Questionnaire # 2 of 2 – "End of Course"

The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain information about the usefulness of the new TU170 course as a form of staff development in ICT skills.

1. Name:

2. Please assess your current competence in these areas after having taken TU170.

	Very competent	Competent	Some competence	No/very little competence
email				
word processing				
first class				
computer conferencing				
web browsing				
html				
virus detection software				
file management				

3. Did this course meet your expectations?

4. (a) What was the most beneficial aspect of the course?
4. (b) What was the most difficult aspect of the course?
5. How did you feel about studying with other associate lecturers?
6. How might you apply the new skills or experience of study you have gained in this course in assisting your work with your own students?
7. Now having engaged in TU170, what advice would you offer to other Associate Lecturers considering taking this course?
8. Please add any additional information or comments which you feel relevant.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please return it in the enclosed pre-paid envelope .

(appendix ends)

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