Designing for Dialogue at a Distance: Reflections on How to Create and Maintain an Effective Teaching-Learning Relationship WithStudents

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The focus of the 1997 DEANZ seminar at which a version of this paper was originally presented was on the independent learner. As Teaching Consultant at the Centre for University Extramural Studies at Massey University at the time, my major role was to encourage staff to prepare materials which would promote learning, and, as that learning would primarily occur at a distance, the course design needed to promote independent learning. This paper has three main sections. It will first define the learning needs and characteristics of adult students and examine how to promote student learning at a distance. Second, it will examine some selected student evaluations of extramural papers from Massey University. The features which students have identified as helping or hindering an effective teaching-learning relationship between teacher and learner will be discussed. These include knowledge of learner needs, assessment and feedback, and administration and teacher availability. Finally, the paper will discuss creating dialogue with students at a distance. It will detail an approach to distance teaching based on the notions of dialogue, scaffolding, and apprenticeship in learning, which may be a useful model for instructional design in diverse delivery modes.

DEFINING THE LEARNING NEEDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT STUDENTS

When I began most courses on instructional design for distance learning or courses on adult learning, I found it very useful to get participants to focus on their own learning and what factors had contributed to their own success or failure in learning a new task. I asked them to reflect on the following issues:

- think about an ability or skill you have which you are good at:
  - how did you acquire that skill?
  - how and why do you know that you are good at that skill?
- name one thing which you do badly:
  - why do you do it badly?
  - how do you know you do it badly?

I would then ask staff to identify the key issues in terms of promoting their learning and in their failure to learn, and if there were any similarities. We would then take the line of thought further to consider learning at a distance, and think about what factors could help or hinder learning. When the issue of students with previously unsuccessful learning experiences was added to the equation, most people began to recognise the difficulty of meeting the needs of students with diverse learning needs and experiences. Usually we generated some ideas about the need for positive feedback, practice, time, personal interest and motivation, learning support, well designed materials, accessible tutors and so forth. In addition to recognising their own learning style and preferences, course participants would come to the

conclusion that knowing something about learners in general would also be useful.

So why am I telling you this? It is because often new lecturing staff at Massey University with whom I worked, were academically well qualified but poorly prepared for distance teaching, in that they either knew little about the needs of distance learners, or knew little about how to promote learning. Both understanding of learners' needs and the lack of it are clearly demonstrated in some of the feedback from students presented later in this paper.

Merriam and Caffarella (1991) outline several characteristics of adult learners, which can be particularly helpful in identifying the learning needs of students:

- the context of adult learners' lives shapes their learning;
- adults have assumed responsibility for managing their own lives and add the role of the learner to their other responsibilities;
- learning typically arises from the context of their lives, which is tied to the sociocultural setting in which they live;
- learning in adulthood is characterised by its usefulness for immediate application to the duties and responsibilities inherent in the adult role of worker, spouse, parent, citizen and so forth;
- rich life experiences differentiate one adult from another, and self-identity is the result of accumulated unique life experiences;
- adults are themselves an important resource for learning and often the need to make sense of experiences is the incentive for learning activity in the first place;
- engagement of past experiences with new learning is different for adults than for children; adults modify, transfer and reintegrate meanings, values, strategies and skills, rather than formulate and accumulate as they do in childhood;
- adults may need to unlearn bad habits and negative views of learning;
- the tasks of adulthood are different from those of the child, as in addition to acquiring new knowledge and skills, the adult is faced with the struggle to integrate personal and family relationships, life events and transitions and personal or employment-related crises. For example, Aslanian and Brickell (1980, in Merriam and Cafarella, 1991) found that 83% of adult learners in their study were involved in learning to cope with a transition. They concluded, "to know an adult's life schedule is to know their learning schedule" (pp. 60-61). The reason for learning may not lie in the learner themselves, but in the tension between the learner and their socio-cultural world.

Although the basic process of learning is the same for children as for adults, learning is affected by non-cognitive factors such as pacing, meaningfulness and motivation. An adult's ability to respond slows with age, and time limit pressures have a negative effect on learning performance. Adults do better with material which has personal relevance or meaning, which is part of the reason why adults tend to do well in any study they attempt, because they concentrate their learning in areas of their experience and interest. Age and health factors, such as fatigue, medication, disuse of abilities, environmental conditions and interference from previous learning can all affect new learning. However, adults can more readily transform new knowledge as a result of their accumulation of life experiences, and adult thought can be defined as "problem finding" rather than the problem solving which typifies adolescent and young adult thought (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991). Effective adult thinking is not that which provides immediate answers, but that which first discovers the important questions and exposes the important problems.

Ladyshewsky (1995) argues that the following principles of adult learning need to be taken into account when devising any programme that will be effective and meet the needs of learners:

- adults need to feel that what they are learning is important and relevant to them;
- the learner should agree with the goals of the learning experience;
- the supervisor should provide a safe learning environment;
- the student should be actively involved in the learning process;
- the learner is given responsibility for progressing at his/her own pace;
- the learner must see progress towards the established goals;
- the task students are being asked to perform should be practical and immediately applicable.

DEFINING AND PROMOTING A TEACHING-LEARNING DIALOGUE

There is a growing body of literature about how to create a teaching-learning dialogue with students at a distance, all of which fits in a cognitive constructivist model of education (Garrison, 1993), in which the learner is seen to be an active constructor of knowledge and meanings. Lockwood (1992) outlines three key methods of instructional design, which have gained in acceptance with distance education providers around the world. These are the notions of tutorial in print (Rowntree, 1973), reflective action guide (Rowntree, 1990) and dialogue (Evans and Nation, 1989).

Most people recognise these forms of instructional design when they see them. The tutorial in print simulates the experience of the student and a teacher in a tutorial, where the teacher provides resources, asks questions and sets exercises, and provides feedback on key issues. A reflective action guide provides guidance on knowledge and activities, but requires the student to do the bulk of the learning and the activity away from the materials themselves, and to gather and assess feedback for themselves. The notion of dialogue is based on the premise that adults are active constructors of meaning, and as such they should be part of the teaching-learning dialogue as if they were in the classroom, and they should be party to the thinking of the writer of the instructional materials. By using different type fonts, Evans and Nation present different aspects of the dialogue, which students are invited to join. All of the models have their strengths, but they all focus on the responsibility of the individual learner for their own learning, even though there is an implicit assumption that effective student support measures will go hand in hand with self-instructional materials. If we are to consider the teaching-learning relationship in a fuller sense of dialogue, then we need to look in more detail at the ways in which we can address the learning needs of students in the most effective manner.

Vygotsky's theory (1978) provides a useful framework for consideration of how to build upon existing cognition and recognise the shaping influence of life experience and culture. Although much of Vygotsky's theory is based upon research with children, there is growing evidence that the principles can be usefully applied to adult development and learning as well (Bolton and Unwin, 1995; Moll, 1990). Vygotsky's claim that higher mental functioning in the individual is rooted in social life was influenced by Marxist theory, which basically states that in order to understand the individual it is necessary to understand the social relations in which the individual exists. Vygotsky's general claim about the social origins of higher mental functioning in the individual surfaces most clearly in connection with the "zone of proximal development", which Vygotsky examined in relation to I.Q. and for the organisation for instruction.

> With regard to the former, he argued that measuring the level of potential development is just as important as measuring the actual developmental level; with regard to the latter, he argued that instruction should be more closely tied to the level of potential development than to the level of actual development (Wertsch, 1991, p.28).

Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development suggests the social interaction

between the competent adult and the less competent young, is the means by which the adult lends "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1986, p.74) to implant a vicarious consciousness in the learner. Vygotsky (1978) defines it as the "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and the higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Vygotsky (1962) predicted that the "zone of proximal development" would be evident in the way in which teachers provide a scaffold for the learner within conversations between what they know and what they learn to know. This method of instruction is often referred to as cognitive apprenticeship, within which the more senior member of the relationship gradually withdraws support, as the learner becomes increasingly proficient in the task.

Vygotksy's (1987) ideas that the forms of speaking encountered in school provide the framework for concept development are usefully expanded by Bakhtin's notion of the "voice" in learning, the idea that an utterance always expresses a point of view. Bakhtin's notion of voice is not reducible to an account of vocal-auditory signals. It applies to written as well as spoken communication, and it is concerned with the broader issue of the speaking subjects' perspective, conceptual horizon, intention and world view (Wertsch, 1991). Bakhtin considers that people make use of a social language in making an utterance and that the social language shapes what the individual can say. Bakhtin called the process of making unique utterances in a social language "ventriloquation" (Wertsch, 1991). As Bakhtin argues "The word of language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' when the speaker populates it with his own intention, own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-294; in Wertsch, 1991).

Bakhtin viewed social languages and speech genres as the ways in which communicative and mental action are organised. Through mediation or the "voice", learners learn not only the words of another person, but also their intention and purpose, which the learner may then internalise to enable them to self-instruct the next time the event occurs. The "voice" in distance teaching materials permeates the choice of media, the instructional design methodology, readings and textbooks, the assessment, and the feedback loops between teacher and student.

Recognition and reflection on the "voice" permeating materials is crucial, as it will play a large part in student achievement and progression. Peer review of materials prior to production can assist in identifying the extent, clarity and sub-text of the teaching voice in the materials. Gallimore and Tharp (1990) state that instructing is rarely seen as a means of assisting performance, which they consider to be to the learner's detriment.

> It is important that instructing be included in teaching, because the instructing voice of the teacher becomes the self-instructing voice of the learner in the transition from apprentice to self regulated performer. The non-instructing teacher may be denying the learner the most valuable residue of the teaching interaction; that heard, regulating voice, that gradually internalised voice, which then becomes the pupil's self regulating "still, small" instructor" (p.181).

Questioning calls for active linguistic and cognitive response. There are two types of questions: assistance and assessment. Assessment questions are used most often, while assistance questions are most helpful. Through cognitive structuring the teacher helps the learner to organise information: through memorization, recall or accumulating evidence. All of these types of questioning can be used to help learners develop through the stages of the zone of proximal development. There are four stages to the zone of proximal development, according to

Gallimore and Tharp (1990):

Stage 1: performance assisted by more capable others;
Stage 2: performance assisted by self;
Stage 3: performance is developed, automatized and fossilised;
Stage 4: automatization of performance leads to recursion through the zone of proximal development.

Gallimore and Tharp (1990) argue that adults, like children, also cycle through the zone of proximal development, when they have to do something they have not done for a while, which used to be automatic. They consider that with peers, assisted performance may be reciprocal, especially if they are engaged in joint activities - a reason, they argue, for providing a lot of small peer group activity in classrooms. In distance mode, it is one good reason for providing ways to gather students into study groups, either physically in the regions, or via e-mail, Internet or teleconferencing methods.

Within an adult learning relationship, Bolton and Unwin (1995) consider that adult students need both instruction and inquiry as part of any course. Bolton and Unwin (1995) argue that the apprenticeship model, based on Vygotsky's theory, is useful for conceptualising the relationships involved. Bolton and Unwin outline the following aspects of a cognitive apprenticeship:

- learning occurs in relationship to personal role models;
- personal links to precede learning are established;
- prior learning is recognised;
- learning is task oriented.

The notion of apprenticeship in adult learning involves an understanding that learning occurs in relationship to personal role models, so that teachers need to identify their own learning history, to stress that learning is a personal affair, and to indicate to students that they are still learning. Establishment of a personal link to precede formal learning can be achieved by getting students to send in an autobiographical statement as their first contact with the teacher. In a Massey context, this was sometimes achieved by use of a "self profile" form, which included details about the student and what they hoped to get out of the paper, along with contact details and study group information (for example, see McLachlan-Smith, 1998a; 1998b).

In order to recognise prior knowledge and learning, teachers need to find out what students already know and can do and consider ways in which to support the apprenticeship. An easy way is to use the autobiographical materials to make comments on the first assignment feedback sheet which are personally meaningful, or to provide extra resources which may be relevant to the person's context. Other ways include using basic classroom assessment techniques (Angelo and Cross, 1992), such as a rating system of core content to be included with the self profile form (e.g. I know a lot about this topic, I know something about this topic, I know nothing about this topic). In this way, you can get a snapshot of each learner at the beginning of the course and then help students to self-rate their progress throughout the course.

To make the apprenticeship task-oriented, the structure of the task and the role of the learner need to be clearly defined. Teachers should encourage creativity, so that if the learner can demonstrate the required capability they can move beyond the instructor (e.g. an "A" grade will demonstrate that the work taught the instructor something new). The learner can come to demonstrate expertise across a range of teaching tasks/content, so students can learn by teaching others (e.g. presentations, self and peer review). Learning should be guided and evaluated in early stages, but not necessarily assessed, and assessment weighting should value achievements in later stages of the course. Opportunities for self-assessment need to be provided.

The key issue in terms of creating and maintaining an effective feedback loop for students is to plan for it. Wright and Herteis (1993) state that tertiary students in other countries identify the following features of a good teacher:

- knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject matter and teaching;
- good organisation of subject matter and course;
- effective communication;
- positive attitudes towards students;
- fairness in evaluation and grading;
- flexibility in approaches to teaching.

Many of our students identify similar features, which will be discussed in the next section. The interesting point about this list is that all of these characteristics can be planned for; none of them are necessarily the features of a "natural" teacher. If a teacher has carefully planned a course and addressed the learning needs of students, then they should be rated highly by students on these features of effective teaching. Wright and Herteis's (1993) definition of an effective instructor is particularly relevant: this is not a popularity contest, but "good enough" teaching will make students feel they are on a joint educational adventure with that teacher, on the way to competence and independence as a learner.

The next section will address some of the ways in which students in 1996/97 at Massey University considered that their learning needs had been met or overlooked.

EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE WHICH HAS HELPED OR HINDERED STUDENT LEARNING

As a Teaching Consultant, I was probably one of the few people on the Massey campus who had an overview of both how the university was teaching by distance, and how effective students considered that teaching to be. Part of my role involved designing and carrying out evaluations of extramural papers at the request of paper coordinators or their Head of Department. Sometimes this was done because there was a problem which needed further identification and student comment, and sometimes because a teacher wanted feedback on their own performance, so that improvements could be made in the future. It needs to be stressed that the only evaluation I was involved in was done on a voluntary basis, and the evaluations were sent with both my name and the paper coordinator's name on the memo, and stated that the information would be used for further development of the paper and distance teaching.

I looked into my files of responses for examples of how teacher-learner relationships, assessment and marking procedures, and course administration and availability all affect a student's ability to complete the paper to a satisfactory conclusion. The examples come from a diverse range of disciplines and levels, and all references to discipline, teacher or level have been removed. The examples presented are in no way representative of the effectiveness of teaching at the university. It is important to note that I have particularly highlighted the examples where poor teaching practice has had a negative impact on student learning. However, I have also included examples of where good teaching practice has positively influenced student learning. The examples listed where poor teaching practice is highlighted, however, are useful illustrations of issues which cannot be ignored as papers are designed for an open, flexible or distance market.

KNOWLEDGE OF LEARNER NEEDS

Interestingly, given the previous discussion of the characteristics of adult learners, many students comment that staff have little to no understanding of the conditions under which they are studying, and what that should mean for the organisation of the paper. The following quotes indicate areas of concern:

> Application of concepts of adult learning is poor.

> I found the attitude of two of the tutors very arrogant. Positive encouragement helps learning more than making adults look stupid.

Along with not recognising the needs of the adult learner, there were comments which related to the lack of recognition of workload in the materials:

> As a mature person returning to study, the time span for study relative to content is too short. I have withdrawn from the paper because full-time workload and new learning in this paper was too heavy.

> Extramural needs more latitude with deadlines than internal students and more support. I know this because I have spent 5 years studying full-time and 5 years part-time. In my long experience there is a wide variety of support and flexibility standards among lecturers. Lecturers need to understand that work flows can vary, emergencies arise, staff shortages occur, and all these can occur at horribly short notice, side swiping weekends put aside for assignments. Some lecturers are very realistic and more than willing to accommodate students' individual needs plus provide encouragement. Extramural students are very appreciative of this.

> In the introductory module I do not think the tutors have any idea how much work is involved. I suggest they get someone with no knowledge of this topic in to do it and see just how time consuming it is.

Students who were happier with their materials nearly always commented on the clarity of structure and recognition of workload and learning needs:

> Excellent, well set out and understandable. Review questions and points to ponder were helpful in directing my study.

> Well structured course with clear objectives. Good general coverage of a broad subject. Overall workload appropriate.

> The subject - learning more about xxx, just makes me appreciate it and want to learn more about it! The paper coordinator was friendly, helpful and really knew the topic. The study guide was so well presented and organised.

Other students commented on the lack of "teacher voice" in the materials, as they looked for guidance on the readings and the textbook:

> There is inadequate material from the course tutor in each study guide. For example on each of the 13 modules there is no more than 4-5 pages of guidance before a whole pile of readings.

> I felt absolutely bogged down by the number of readings. The essay topics were so wide that they required extensive reading. I found it difficult to collate the different threads especially as much of the subject is so subjective.

On the other hand, students rated courses highly which had a strong theory/practice link and which provided choice and opportunity for feedback.

> The paper is well organised with an excellent integration of theory to practical application, which kept interest high.

> I enjoyed the range of choice in the modules to be completed; the paper can be tailored to personal interests. Feedback was prompt and comprehensive. Excellent paper.

> I really liked being "included in the

text". Being permitted to draw on my own experiences let me reflect and gain greater understanding of various concepts introduced throughout the course by relating them to my life. Also helped make me feel valued as I am, as I could have personal input.

One of the interesting things about asking questions of adult students is that they have very clear ideas about how to promote student learning. Many of them have reflected on their own learning and work conditions, and articulate very clearly what is effective. It is important to listen to these student messages, as this is a very mobile and articulate group of consumers, who can destroy the reputation of programmes and institutions in a short period of time. Currently, more and more tertiary institutions are moving into the provision of open, distance and flexible learning opportunities. Students have increased access to local providers and to major international institutions via the Internet. It is therefore imperative that the home grown product is tailored to suit the learning needs of local students and that opportunities for seeking feedback from students are created.

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK Assessment procedures are one of the main ways in which lecturers and tutors have contact with students. As many students comment, this is often the only way in which they get personal feedback on their progress, and so they want it as comprehensive and as constructive as possible. It is important that staff think through the impact of their marking procedures on a student who is receiving comments outside of a classroom discussion of grades and results. Some student comments demonstrate the effect of marking which does not help to create or maintain a teaching-learning dialogue.

Also the marking is too tough for this module, destructive actually. Last year I gave up the paper because of the attitude and destructive comments of the markers and this year I nearly did the same. For the next 2 papers I got a B and A, 3rd not marked yet. I do not claim to be a clever student but I do not want to be rubbished at my 1st attempt.

Apart from the comment that marking could be destructive, students also stated that they wanted transparency in marking procedures, so that they could see where they needed to improve or could locate themselves in the overall placement in the class.

An amazing lack of constructive and helpful comments, or even inconstructive ones, a veritable paucity in fact, even on the final assessment. Just nothing.

I found the comments written on my assignment very difficult to read and understand. The final exam seemed to include work that was not covered in the study guide or in recommended reading. It would have been useful to get an answer sheet back with our assignment.

Lack of transparent criteria for marking; a marking schedule and non-emotive comments would have been more helpful. I did not find the comments "articulate" or "careless" very constructive.

Would quite like an overview of everyone's progress, medium/average marks for assignments maybe, to let me know how/where I fit in overall, (a bit of competition, contact, for us extramural isolates).

All of my modules were late, although I can accept a depressed mark for this, what I can't accept is having put a lot of effort into my work to have somebody write totally meaningless comments over it. This indicates to me that my marker only skim-read my work. If I can put 50 hours into writing

these assignments an extra 5 minutes by a marker isn't a lot to ask for.

Rather than ridicule the methods of other disciplines, clearly set out criteria, examples of expectations would be helpful. I thought we had moved away from learning as being an attempt to guess what was in the mind of the teacher.

On the other hand, students who had positive assessment experiences tended to comment favourably on the paper as a whole.

The comments I received were constructive, supportive and encouraging. I really felt that the marker cared about my success/failure at all stages of the course. I have now completed my degree and of all the papers I have done, this was the best by far in this regard. Most helpful and encouraging.

Found reading back comments helpful and positive, even where alternatives were suggested. My self esteem grew from reading comments. My attitude to the course became more and more enthusiastic.

Liked being sent a graph of overall distribution of grades for assignments to let students know how well they did compared with others. Would recommend this for all courses.

The tutor always provided constructive and supportive feedback on all work, ... created an environment where I felt "safe" as an extramural student. The tutor personalised the course with the inclusion of 'newsletter' type updates of the course and encouraging words, which I personally appreciated.

Found the instructions accompanying each assignment helpful in the extreme. Three cheers!

The notion of support is strong in both the students who appreciated feedback from tutors and those who did not feel that they had received adequate feedback on assignments. As part of creating dialogue with students, course writers need to ensure that they have transparent criteria for assessment and that they endeavour to be as positive as possible in marking. This is often easier said than done, when time is short to turn the marking around and an assignment seems particularly inappropriate for the task set. It is imperative to find positive marking procedures, even if this means using a formulaic schedule, so that students can see at a glance where the weaknesses and strengths are in the assignment, and what they need to focus on for the next assignment.

ADMINISTRATION AND TEACHER AVAILABILITY Students are most outspoken about issues in relation to teaching and administration. One of the key complaints extramural students have concerns the availability of the lecturer or tutor who will be marking their work or administering the paper. For many students this experience would colour their opinion of the paper as a whole.

As far as help was concerned it took up to 3 weeks for me to receive an answer so maybe an 0800 number should be available to extramural students, as toll calls in prime time are not easy to finance for most people.

Lecturer did not respond to e-mail or correspondence.

We were not aware till end of course that we could phone our tutor at home, as they were only available one day per week on campus. Because of this many of my calls were not replied to, although the times I did speak to the tutor they were very helpful. Delays in communication leave extramural students feeling very isolated, let alone the expense of the toll calls.

Other students comment on the effect of having a helpful lecturer or tutor and how this coloured their enjoyment of the course.

> The teaching and learning aspects were always well received and helpful. My calls are always returned and I found my tutor's helpful and open approach was excellent, especially in my final year. I have enjoyed this paper and the personal help I have received from my tutor.

> Personal contact with staff who are always helpful and enthusiastic about their subject area [was great].

> Thoroughly enjoyed this course. Would recommend (and have) to others. Found course interesting and informative. I actually looked forward to reading each study guide with excitement. Help and teaching were most valuable.

Other students had suggestions for how the papers should be coordinated:

> I realise the enormous management and admin. Problems that occur with vacation/regional courses, but I have found them to be invaluable. They provide a focus, a chance to get re-enthused. With the only contact being assignment and study guides, it becomes difficult throughout the year, to keep 'Massey work' a high priority.

> It would be useful to have the e-mail addresses of the tutors at the beginning of the year. This is a much quicker way of asking questions than writing.

> I would like to see the use of e-mail and teleconferencing for seminars. That vital part of study cannot be handled by a campus course. Ongoing instruction is essential.

As these comments demonstrate, perceived availability and helpfulness are key attributes of the successful distance teacher. Juggling all the demands placed on teachers can be demanding, but being available at an advertised time for phone calls, or promptly replying to letters or email are obvious ways in which to make students feel that they are part of a teaching-learning relationship. If teaching departments cannot pay for staff to make toll calls, then this should be indicated in the study guide, and alternative arrangements made, such as a "helpdesk" for an hour or two, once a week. None of the problems identified by students are insurmountable; they simply require some creative forethought and planning.

CREATING A TEACHING-LEARNING DIALOGUE AT A DISTANCE As already stated, the comments presented are in no way representative of Massey University courses, but they do give an indication of what works for distance students, and what factors present major obstacles to their learning. As a major provider of tertiary distance education, Massey has long established minimum standards of presentation of materials and information of materials sent to students. However, the area which is hardest to regulate, is the relationship established between teacher and learner. This is particularly challenging if the materials don't have a strong teaching-learning framework in the first place, and then students experience inconsistency in grading and lack of availability from their tutors.

After two and a half years of intensively working with extramural study guides, and being presented with numerous design challenges, I have developed a theory of what can help to create and maintain effective dialogue and feedback loops between teachers and students. The following are my personal suggestions for improving the chances of creating a teaching-learning dialogue with distance students and represent some of the advice I gave to new extramural teaching staff. I also think they provide some interesting and researchable issues for distance educators.

Plan for dialogue in all aspects of the course
Plan for dialogue on many levels: dialogue through choice of instructional design, dialogue through layout and design of materials, dialogue through feedback on assessment, and a commitment to promoting dialogue through access and availability procedures. All of these forms of dialogue are part of a feedback loop, on which students should be encouraged to comment. Developing technologies for distance learning will also require the creation of opportunities for effective dialogue, as students struggle to conquer new technology in addition to new content or disciplines. Feedback needs to take many forms and it needs to be integral to all parts of the course.

Know the learner
Seek and keep profiles of learners, so that the course can be revised upon a sensible diagnosis of typical learners' needs. Understand the basic principles of adult learning and use these to ground courses in realistic teaching and learning goals.

Become a mentor in a cognitive apprenticeship with students
Plan to actively "scaffold" students' learning. Introduce key concepts and techniques early in the course and gradually transfer responsibility for learning to the students. Recognise that some students will require more "scaffolding" than others, and provide "extra for experts" opportunities, as well as tips for those who may be struggling. Recognise and reward students appropriately when they become the expert in the relationship and teach the teacher something new.

Recognise and develop a teaching "voice"
Too many papers deny students an insight into the teacher's thoughts and reasoning, yet this teaching voice can provide students with the framework for the construction of new knowledge and skills, as well as inspiring an interest in the subject. As Lockwood (1992) argues, there are existing models of instructional design and numerous examples to draw on, but we must consider how students will learn from the materials and plan accordingly. Design materials with a view to scaffolding student learning.

Provide a good road map to navigate the course
Make sure that transparent criteria and guidance for assessment have been included. Signpost avenues of support, and send all the information in a clearly navigable format. Remember that students are looking for enthusiasm and organisation!

Provide multiple avenues for student feedback
Simple examples of effective ways include:

- assessment and marking schedules and constructive comments on feedback sheets;
- student self evaluations on progress sheets;
- self review tests and exercises;
- activities in text;
- reflective action guides;
- dialogue in text from multiple perspectives;
- e-mail discussion lists or Web bulletin boards;
- a help desk at certain times of the day/week/month;
- a commitment to answering messages promptly and considerately;
- post-course evaluation and feedback;
- a genuine commitment to listening to students' complaints;
- regular newsletters;
- overview of student performance on assignments;
- and so on...

CONCLUSION This paper introduced the notion of creating dialogue at a distance using the concepts of scaffolding and simple classroom assessment, and a thorough understanding of how adult students learn. An examination of a small sample of student evaluations raised some issues regarding the importance of feedback on assessment and accessibility of teaching staff. To use this information, it is necessary to design courses that are based on sound principles of adult

learning and focus on learners' needs.

Several threads have been drawn together in this paper which are all connected by a focus on promoting independent and effective student learning at a distance. It is necessary to provide opportunities for students to comment on course materials and then to listen to their comments, as they are in the best position to comment on how effective teaching-learning materials are. Strong models of instructional design are also needed during the preparation of materials and recognition of the value and the contribution teachers make to building and shaping out students' knowledge and skills. If students are not given access to teachers' thought processes, they are denied a wealth of experience and skill at thinking about the topic. Finally, a commitment needs to be made to teaching students at a distance by whatever means is possible. As new technologies arrive on the doorstep, keeping an open mind about how they could be used for teaching and how they might best suit the learning needs of students is imperative. Becoming increasingly flexible and reflective on teaching practice is crucial, if we are not to become the dinosaur that was distance education.

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