Institute for Learning and Research Technology

SOLE: Thematic Reports Series

Student and Tutor Roles and Relationships

Document Notes

Main author	Sue Timmis
Contributors	Ros O'Leary, Cynthia Cai, Colin Harrison, Elisabet Weedon, Annie Trapp, Sylvia Alexander, Neil Jacobs, Julian Cook.
Date	08 June 2004
Version	v3
Document Name	SOLE Final Report-roles v3.doc

Summary

This report is part of a series of themed reports examining a number of key aspects of the SOLE study: an evaluation of students' online learning experiences.

Reports in the series cover the following:

- Introduction to the SOLE study

- Summary of key findings

- SOLE methodology

- Student and tutor roles and relationships

- Communications

- Student motivation and confidence

- Activities, tools and learning strategies

Contents

1. Introduction

This report will examine the picture of roles and relationships that has emerged from the SOLE case study data and consider the extent to which student and tutor roles are adapting to online pedagogies and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) for teaching and learning. It will focus primarily on the roles and relationships of students and tutors; issues concerning peer-to-peer communication and interaction are considered in one of the other SOLE reports on Communications although there is inevitably some overlap as these two themes are closely connected.

2. eLearning student and tutor roles

The need for student and tutor roles and relationships to evolve and move away from the traditional information & transmission approach to teaching (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) in order to be successful in adopting a networked learning or e-learning design have already been demonstrated (Goodyear, 2001, Jones, 2000). Furthermore, Armitage & O'Leary (2003) observe that eLearning does not automatically signal role changes unless this is part of the educational philosophy underpinning the design of the course. Goodyear (2001, Table 1 below) has derived a number of indicators for how both tutor and student roles might be expected to change when moving from traditional to online teaching and learning. We have used these indicators to analyse the evidence from the case studies and identify how and where (if at all) roles are changing.

Goodyear: Changing teacher roles
• From oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider
• Teachers become expert questioners, rather than providers of answers
• Teachers become designers of learning student experiences rather than just providers of content
• Teachers provide only the initial structure to student work, encouraging increasing self- direction
• Teacher presents multiple perspectives on topics, emphasising the salient points
• From a solitary teacher to a member of a learning team (reduces isolation sometimes experienced by teachers)
• From teacher having total autonomy to activities that can be broadly assessed
• From total control of the teaching environment to sharing with the student as fellow learner
• More emphasis on sensitivity to student learning styles
• Teacher-learner power structures erode
Changing student roles
• From passive receptacles for hand-me-down knowledge to constructors of their own knowledge
• Students become complex problem-solvers rather than just memorises of facts
• Students see topics from multiple perspectives
• Students refine their own questions and search for their own answers
• Students work as group members on more collaborative/co-operative assignments; group interaction significantly increased
• Increased multi-cultural awareness
• Students work toward fluency with the same tools as professionals in their field
• More emphasis on students as autonomous, independent, self-motivated managers of their own time and learning process
• Discussion of students' own work in the classroom
• Emphasis on knowledge use rather than only observation of the teacher's expert performance or just learning to "pass the test"
• Emphasis on acquiring learning strategies (both individually and collaboratively)
• Access to resources is significantly expanded

Table 1: Extract from "Effective networked learning in higher education: notes and guidelines" – Goodyear, P (2001, p91)

3. Methodology

As part of the SOLE research design, the following research questions were included in order to investigate the kinds of roles and relationships between students and tutors and students themselves:

- What are the roles of the tutor and the student? How do these relate to the implicit and explicit model of learning? How does it relate to student participation in the VLE?

- Is it possible to identify issues around authority, for example, of knowledge, of expertise and teacher-student communications, in relation to VLEs?

These were addressed in a number of evaluation instruments but primarily through semi-structured interviews with students and tutors. In interviews with students and tutors, we asked participants for their views on their own and others' roles and how these contributed to major positive and negative incidents that occurred during the module. The critical incident technique was used to frame these questions (see Flanagan, 1954; Gilbert & Lockwood, 1999). Students were also given a series of statements on cards and asked to physically place these on a 5 point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree according to their view. They were then asked to say why they took this view. Statements included the following, which are relevant to this aspect of the study:

"Communicating online with the tutor and fellow students in this module was a real challenge"

"Online discussions were a good way to learn in this module"

"You have to think for yourself with this kind of learning"

"We didn't need a tutor for this course"

"Working in [vle] *is all about working on your own"*

"On this module, I have learnt a lot from discussions with fellow students"

"Working online in [vle] *encourages me to feel part of the group"*

These responses have also been analysed as part of this aspect of the research. In addition, an in-depth study of the discourse presented in discussion board postings and interview data was undertaken and some of the findings from this study are also presented here. The full student and tutor interview schedules and further details on the methodology are available from the SOLE Website at: http://sole.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/research.html

In the following sections, the findings from the interviews and discourse study are presented and analysed. These are then followed by conclusions and a list of recommendations.

4. Interview data

4.1   Education

Many of the participants in the Education case studies (especially case study 3), showed a strong awareness of the need for new ways of interrelating in an online context:

> *"The tutor was the facilitator. I had to be fully active in personally carrying out tasks and making decisions. I also had to communicate when I needed help." (student – case study 3)*

Similarly during staff interviews for case study 3, the tutor demonstrated her expectations that students would take more control and reported that she viewed her role as facilitative, although also still emphasised the need to structure the activities:

> *" …different at different stages .. The first stage would be me standing up and introducing the exercise to get the aims across. … Once the activity is started I go around and check progress … so I was acting principally as a facilitator.." (tutor – case study 3)*

However, case study 3 was a small group of postgraduate students so the level of increased awareness might have been anticipated. Despite being comfortable with increased responsibility for their own learning, students in both case studies still emphasised the importance of the tutor to them:

"…*because teaching is all about communicating with other people and I think that without the tutors there and being able to e-mail them and contact them, I think Blackboard works best when it's alongside a course where you have to come in. I don't think I would have liked it so much if it was like a distance learning thing.*" *(student - case study 4)*

In case study 4, where students were B.Ed students who spent a lot of their time off campus in schools, working at a distance seemed to influence their views:

"*I agree with number seven that working with Blackboard is about working on your own. That kind of is a bit weird for me to put it there but because you are able to distance yourself, like being at home and log on and go in whenever you want. You know – you can go back to lecture notes in your own time and think about it (….) and then that way you are not so dependent on other people*" *(student - case study 4).*

This student clearly felt a bit uncomfortable with the concept of working alone despite acknowledging that this was happening and the necessity of it. This seems to support the idea that students will adapt their roles when this is essential, such as when working remotely in schools.

Tutors in case study 4 also reported the VLE was found to be very helpful in raising self-esteem and increasing participation in some students. They reported one student as saying that she loved the virtual session, because she wasn't judged by how she looked, how she dressed, or how rapidly she reacted to another's idea. The tutors described this as a key moment for them in convincing them of the value of using a virtual learning environment as it radically changed how this young woman participated in and viewed her participation in the group.

4.2   Economics

In Economics the two case studies presented very different learning models. In the first study where the students worked in teams throughout the module, the students' responsibility for learning was acknowledged and the tutor was generally viewed by the students and himself as an expert guide facilitating the workshop module; many of the students mentioned his supportive role:

"*…I don't think he was traditional… this type of module is independent work… you had to meet this deadline…If you don't get it done, that's your own fault. If you ever went to him, with any problems…he was always very willing to help…*" *(student – case study 7)*

"*My role is there just to make sure that groups are progressing, so someone for the managers to report to if they have particular problems. Just to keep an eye on things. And obviously to mark the end result….*" *(tutor – case study 7)*

In case study 8 - the other Economics study, the role of the tutor is seen by students in more traditional terms and he is seen as having a strong leadership role. There is also less congruence between the tutors' perceptions and the students, for example, here the student sees the teacher as the expert, in control:

"*I think it [the tutor's role] was more the source of expert knowledge than anything else. Because I can say that he already has a PhD in economics, so he should know what's best.*" *(student – case study 8)*

The tutor, however, identified his support role in the context of an equal relationship with the students:

"*I've always been very clear with the students that I'm ready to do things for them, as long as they do things for me- in the sense that as long as they put effort in themselves, I put effort. If they don't put effort, I don't put effort.*" *(tutor - case study 8)*

Furthermore, although the tutor wanted to foster more independent learning, he was viewed by the students as a strong leader and this was seen by them as a factor in maintaining reliance on him.

'*…. there were not many discussions from fellow students… the teacher had such a strong role.*' *(student – case study 8)*

Nevertheless, several students indicated that they saw themselves primarily as working alone and in some responses demonstrated responsibility for their own learning:

> *"Well, I would say I was more of a researcher. …we all have to learn how to research, and how to manage our time, and how to learn on our own."(student- case study 8)*

4.3   Information and Computer Science

In the Information and Computer Science case studies, both the tutor and students expressed some anxiety about the lack of face to face:

> *"I enjoy the contact with classes and I think you need to be careful not to lose that"* and it *"can be a bit distancing".* (tutor – case study 1)

> *"danger of not having as much one on one contact with the tutor so wouldn't like to see WebCT take over."* (student- case study 1)

The three tutors in case study 1 worked as a team, recognising the benefits of sharing the curriculum design and management:

> *"it is a big thing to manage on your own." "It's been really nice this year to not just be me doing it. Working with the other colleagues and thinking about other possibilities".* (tutor – case study 1).

Also the need to make notes more accessible and current has impacted on the tutors' role:

> *"it makes you focus on making your materials accessible ….. they are not always available in that medium, I had to scan pictures or examples in, it's quite irritating – definitely a change in my teaching, I tended to update things as I never used to make them all available electronically."* (tutor – case study 2).

These last two quotations both support Goodyear's assertion that tutors in a networked learning environment become designers of learning student experiences, not just content providers. Also another movement in roles Goodyear suggests is: "From a solitary teacher to a member of a learning team (reduces isolation sometimes experienced by teachers), which is clearly in evidence here.

Students in both these case studies appeared to be quite comfortable with working online (as might be expected, given the discipline area they are working in) and showed a high level of self-awareness and comfort with providing peer support, as the tutor explains:

> *"What tends to happen is we all log in every day or every other day or something and discover a strand has started up ….I cannot do something….someone else will either have chipped in with neither can I or someone will have put up a solution. Students have become quite good now at putting up solutions, saying what I tried was this…….sometimes I'll leap in and say well actually what I meant you to do was this. At other occasions I'll just sit back and watch them develop, sometimes the discussions are more valuable without me. Sometimes you will see the first person who happened to have got in has actually missed the point of the other person's question and has given them a tip which is actually going to make life very hard."* (tutor – case study 2)*.*

4.4   Psychology

In both the Psychology case studies, there was again evidence of the tutor aspiring to a guidance and support model, indicating role changes mentioned by Goodyear.

> *"I suppose I see myself more as someone who facilitates their learning"* (tutor - case study 6)

> *"…I would like them to support each other and share what they had learnt and if they have something to tell each other about….." "…What I expect is going to happen is that they are not going to do that. That they are going to continue to be over reliant on me but they need to be trained, trained to behave!" – (tutor - case study 5)*

However in case study 5, it is also clear that the tutor has little confidence that his approach will work. He sees the students as quite separate to his teaching, and feels he has little influence over them. At the end he felt that the students still retained traditional dependent roles though it is worth noting that he does not take any responsibility for this:

> *"They still see it very much as I'm the tutor and they are the students, what they go on there for is to find out what I have put on for them not to share things around or discuss things."* (tutor - case study 5)

This is supported by the student views, where anxiety was expressed around a loss of face-to-face contact:

> *"I would say that one of the problems, I mean the discussion board is really good and everything but [the tutor] said we should try and use that instead of coming to see him….but I would like to see him more----I thought it would be another aid, but its like a substitute"* (student -case study 5)

The tutor in case study 6 adopted an independent learning model and saw her role as that of a facilitator, the course allowed opportunities for both group work and individual tasks and the tutor had a lot of experience of using a VLE in teaching. However, when looking at the issue of support, it is clear that the tutor is still the central focus of the teaching – a more traditional role than might have been first thought:

> *"The ease of them being able to ask questions online. Apart from that there isn't that much actual support online, the support's actually in the workshop so although they are online they're asking questions directly to us rather than asking online. They sometimes will ask questions online even though they're in the workshop and I'm in the workshop."* (Tutor - case Study 6)

Furthermore, there were also a number of responses from the students interviewed indicating that it was still the face-to-face support they received from the tutor that was central to their confidence in their work. Although they were confident in using the VLE, they did not feel it was as good as direct contact with the tutor:

> *"If you went to the lectures/workshops [the tutor] is always there to ask questions so I thought that was good. If you didn't go to the lectures I'd imagine it would be a bit harder to communicate with her because it would all be through email."* (Student - case study 6)

4.5   Language

In addition to analysing the reports that students and teachers gave of their roles and relationships, we have also examined the language used in interviews where students were asked to describe positive incidents they had experienced with a VLE. From this, it appears that there may be more congruence with the changing student roles identified by Goodyear (see table 1) than was initially apparent. When describing their positive experiences with VLEs, the following words (or synonyms thereof) were frequently present in responses across the case studies: *"guidance" "guidelines", "guide", "set out in stages", "step by step", "revisit", "go back", "tips".* These descriptors seem to suggest the students were being asked to solve problems (and appreciate guidance they were given on this) and where they have more autonomy and control over the management of learning. These reflect Goodyear's ideas on the shift in role from being a focal point for the students and adopting the role of guide and learning designer, mediated through the VLE.

In addition to this, we undertook an in depth discourse analysis of the interview data and discussion board data of one case study (8). The majority of these findings will be reported elsewhere (in particular in relation to communication issues) and the full report is available from: http://sole.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/findings.html, however, the following findings are also revealing in terms of our consideration of eLearning roles.

In this section, we show how the tutors' unconscious use of language demonstrates some of the contradictions already highlighted above.

> *"In the lecture notes I have the advantage of saying: "OK, you come to lecture, these are the lecture notes, you don't have to take down any notes and so on. So sit down, and then listen carefully to what I say, and participate to what I say. You don't have to waste time writing and listening, because you cannot do those two things at the same time." So that is one major tool in order to try to convey as much information as possible."* (tutor – case study 8)

It appears from this quote that learning is about listening to what the tutor says (while seated i.e. passive?). He does however use the word participate. It is not clear what that might mean but could be something like "listen in a participative way". It may be a sign that his awareness that learning is

"not supposed to be" a passive process is in tension with his positioning the learners in a passive role. However it may also be a language issue as the tutor is not a native English speaker so this may impact on this interpretation.

Nevertheless, at face value, the quote implies that learners are not able to write and listen at the same time; that writing while listening is a waste of time. The advantage is that learners do not have to do anything that might distract them from the task of absorbing the structured information he is presenting. The phrase "sit down and listen carefully to what I say" puts the tutor very clearly at the centre of the teaching and learning discourse.

Also the word "information" is used here as opposed to "knowledge", or "ideas". It seems to say that what is learnt is something static and unquestioned, consisting of "facts". All these ideas position the learner as a passive consumer of information. Learning is about being fed with "information". It may be argued that the quote above refers only to lectures and lecture notes and that the tutor's ideas may be different in other activities. However another quote below suggests that he positions himself very much at the centre-stage of the VLE as well.

> *"This year, more than in the past, students posted emails on WebCT rather than emailing directly to me on my normal email address. And so, that gives me a sense that the students are using, or seeing more WebCT as a kind of teaching tool, as a place where I am, and where I can give them answers." (tutor – case study 8)*

The discourse analysis also revealed similar underlying contradictions in the discussion board data. The tutor often followed up contributions from students with evaluative comments such as "this is an excellent link" and asked follow up questions or turned the activity in a new direction, thus revealing that the tutor still regards his role as central to the discussion board activities and that allowing students more autonomy is more complex than we might at first think. Further information on this analysis can be found in the full discourse analysis report at http://sole.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/findings.html,

This data is only available for one of the case studies and hence cannot be considered representative. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that there may be unconscious messages and directions embedded in the language we use which reveal different expectations of tutor and student roles than the intended learning model may suggest or indeed expect.

5. Summary of findings

There is some evidence that tutors in these studies are adapting their roles in line with Goodyear's indicators. In the particular, the following indicators were all represented to an extent by most of the studies:

- **From oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider**

- **Teachers become designers of learning student experiences rather than just providers of content**

- **Teachers provide only the initial structure to student work, encouraging increasing self-direction**

- **Teacher presents multiple perspectives on topics, emphasising the salient points**

- **From a solitary teacher to a member of a learning team (reduces isolation sometimes experienced by teachers)**

(From Goodyear, 2001 – see table 1)

Where there is far less evidence of a shift in roles in these studies is in relation to autonomy, sharing control of the environment with students and becoming expert questioners rather than providers of answers. These aspects however, are potentially more challenging in terms of transforming one's practice and might be expected to be less evident than those listed above.

Several of the tutors involved in the case studies saw themselves as facilitative, encouraging students to adopt an independent or collaborative learning style. However, the desire for face-to-face communications, personal charisma, dialogue and communication issues and the explicit learning models often prevented this from being fully achieved. There was also some evidence that some tutors may not always see the facilitation of learner independence as part of their active role as tutor.

Students also present a somewhat contradictory picture. Whilst students often said that they were comfortable with being independent learners, the same students also reported that the tutor's role was central to them and that they still viewed him or her as the expert. When we compare again with Goodyear's key indicators, it appears to be those at the bottom of Table 1 which are more in evidence in our studies:

- **Students work toward fluency with the same tools as professionals in their field**

- **More emphasis on students as autonomous, independent, self-motivated managers of their own time and learning process**

- **Discussion of students' own work in the classroom**

- **Emphasis on knowledge use rather than only observation of the teacher's expert performance or just learning to "pass the test"**

- **Emphasis on acquiring learning strategies (both individually and collaboratively)**

- **Access to resources is significantly expanded**

(From Goodyear, 2001 – see table 1)

The other indicators, which were much less in evidence, focus on knowledge construction, complex problem solving and critical thinking and are, higher order skills desirable in any learning context. As higher order learning may be potentially more challenging to achieve, it may not be too surprising that there is less evidence of these from the interviews which, furthermore, in themselves, only present a partial picture.

The Education case studies, however, reported high levels of comfort with these roles (although it was the postgraduates in case study 3, rather than the undergraduates in Case study 4 who consistently put this into practice). Jones (2000) observed that those involved in teaching using networked learning environments (or VLEs) tended to share a common educational philosophy, which emphasised the importance of collaborative learning, made links between the literature and their practice and were sensitive to the need to adopt different learning styles and approaches. Students in our Education studies, who are likely to have studied constructivism and social constructivism as part of their course, were perhaps in a better position to recognise and adapt to new roles than the students in the other case studies.

However, whilst students and tutors in the Education case studies appear at ease with the kinds of roles outlined in Goodyear's checklist, there were some contradictions in the way the VLE was used. In case study 3, although the discussion aspect of the course was successful in terms of levels of participation, this all took place in a highly structured format, often taking place in the classroom under controlled conditions. It could be argued that this structure itself exerted control and that therefore the responsibility for the learning still lay with the tutor. One student in case study 4 also highlighted the tension between the implicit learning model of the VLE, the intentions of the tutors and students' roles:

> *"How would I improve Blackboard? (…) And for my own personal benefit I think if students want to post something on there then they should be able to do that as well. I might be able to do it but I don't know how. (…) a guy in my Maths group had done this PowerPoint presentation and he's saved it on Blackboard in his group so he would be group 10. And I would have really liked to have gone back and accessed it but I'm only able to get into group 4's area"* (student – case study 4)

The tight rein that most VLEs have over the authority and structure of the learning environment (for example – in most cases students cannot create discussion groups or a new work area) also restrains students' ability to be spontaneous and create appropriate work structures. This, in turn, re-shifts the power balance back towards the tutor.

Roles and relationships in our case studies are also influenced by cultural factors such as first language, and cultural background, but also by the subject they are studying. According to Ting-Toomey (1999) cultural communication styles associated with learning cultures differ across major linguistic groupings and differences in teaching modes and attitudes to learning will have a bearing on online communication, which in turn will impact on roles and authority issues. Cultural issues will be considered in more depth in the report on communications but it should still be noted that where large numbers of students had a first language other than English (in case study 8 this was 42.5%) or were educated outside the UK (in case study 8 again, 60%), roles and relationships were naturally influenced by these factors and may go some way to explain why relationships were misaligned in that study.

There were some differences between subject areas that should also be noted. For example, the students in case studies 1 & 2 reported very high levels of confidence in using the internet and working online which could be anticipated from students in Information and computer science subject area. This appeared to make them reasonably comfortable with more active roles when working online (although they too were concerned about losing face-to-face contact). The Psychology and Economics case studies did not present such a consistent picture and much evidence is contradictory. However, the adoption of new roles, coupled with self awareness was most strongly in evidence in the Education studies, where tutor and student understanding of the theoretical principles and educational purposes underpinning a learning activity is likely to be much stronger. It could be argued, therefore, that in preparing both staff and students for learning with VLEs there needs to be more tutoring in these theoretical principles and that students may need to be given more explicit guidance on how the different types of support and roles fit together to meet their needs.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Our initial conclusions, earlier in the project, that tutors and students may be adopting only limited changes of role have been modified as our analysis of the data has deepened. However the picture is complex and at times, contradictory. We have shown that whilst students in most of these studies still see the tutor role as central to their learning, they are adapting their roles to work online, though not consistently. However, they do appear to acknowledge and appreciate the mediation role that the VLE presents and the importance of its guidance and support role is clear. Tutors reported their desire to support more egalitarian relationships with shared responsibility and control but in some cases this was not aligned to their learning models and communication processes. Furthermore, the VLE construct itself is not pedagogically neutral and current models may prevent more dynamic role changes and new ways of learning by ensuring that tutors retain control of the set up of the environment, preventing learners themselves from shaping and initiating their online workspace and methods. If online power relationships are to become more balanced, then the technological infrastructure of VLEs needs to afford more equality and power sharing.

A number of recommendations are suggested to encourage greater adoption of appropriate roles, in line with Goodyear's indicators:

1. Students need explicit guidance on the kinds of roles, they, their peers and tutors will need to adopt as part of both VLE induction programmes and the introduction to any course which uses a VLE.

2. Tutors need similar guidance to make the need for new roles clearly understood. Role models provided by peers might be an effective approach.

3. Students and tutors need opportunities to reflect with others and evaluate their experiences of working online and with VLEs.

4. Tutoring in the principles of constructivist and collaborative pedagogic approaches should be available to tutors and students.

5. Team teaching approaches, in particular, should be encouraged in both tutoring and course development to support collaboration and in recognition of the increasing and diverse demands that e-tutoring involves.

6. VLE architectures need to support a wider variety of learning models (in particular constructivist and learner-centred) and allow students to shape and influence their learning context more directly.

This report has set out evidence of relationships between tutors and students found from the data gathered as part of the SOLE project. Although, it is clear that online relationships and pedagogies are evolving, this seems to be primarily through small steps, rather than giant leaps. However, as roles become more adapted, communication and online discourse will require more in-depth analysis to ensure that this evolution is fully understood, can be mediated and translated into practice.

7. References

Armitage, S. and O'Leary, R. (2003) e-Learning Series No 4: A Guide For Learning Technologists. York. Learning and Teaching Support Network.

Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The Critical Incident Technique. Psychological Bulletin, 51(4), 327-358.

Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W (2000) 'Critical inquiry in a text –based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education'. The Internet and Higher Education, 2(2-3), 87-105.

Gilbert, N. and Lockwood, A. (1999) Critical Incident Technique. In: Handbook of Contemporary Hospitality Management Research. Edited by B. Brotherton. Weimar, Texas: Culinary and Hospitality Industry Publications Services

Goodyear, P., (2001), Effective networked learning in higher education: notes and guidelines, available at <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/jisc/advice.htm >– last accessed 05 March 2004

Jones, C. (1999) "From the sage on the stage to what exactly? Description and the place of the moderator in co-operative and collaborative learning.". ALT-J, The Association for Learning Technology Journal. 1999. Vol. 7 No2 pp 27 – 36

Phillips R. (ed), Bain J., McNaught C., Rice M., Tripp D.(2000) Handbook for learner-centered evaluation of computer facilitated learning projects in higher education. Murdoch University, Australia <http://wwwtlc1.murdoch.edu.au/projects/cutsd99/> last accessed 18 December 2003