12: Building social spaces in a blended course – the value of critical friendship groups

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Background

The course is a 3 year part time BA (Hons) in Education and Training. Students are teachers in a variety of work related and Further Education, FE, contexts, for instance lecturing in construction or functional skills or training in information and communication technology, ICT. They have generally completed a Certificate in Education but are undertaking the BA in order to develop their academic knowledge and skills and to further their professional development. Thus they are busy professionals who have a wealth of practical teaching experience to draw on but are time poor in terms of combining work with part time study.

The course has been redesigned to make greater use of learning technology to support the teaching and learning process. Instead of weekly evening attendance students now attend Saturday day schools. (In the first year there are 8 Saturday day schools, 6 in year 2 and only 4 in year 3.) Thus the limited face to face contact with tutors and other students means it becomes a necessity to employ easy to use e-facilities to communicate.

Intended outcome(s)

- To reduce isolation through use of technology supported activities between face to face meetings.
- To recognise the value of learning through collaboration and to keep this emphasis despite the less regular and more limited face to face contact.
- To embrace and maintain the value of the learning that comes from the knowledge and experience that the students bring well as formal learning through access to e-spaces for different activities.
- To reinforce the activities that take place on the day school.
- To value the knowledge that students contribute to the learning activities alongside the prepared material provided on by the tutors on the virtual learning environment, VLE.
- To model activities that students can adapt in their institution using a basic level of technology (only VLE) rather than more sophisticated tools (eg webinars).
- To develop critical friendships that are supported through range of media and learning activities.
- To develop a sense of being part of a community of enquiry.

The challenge
The decision to go to a blended delivery model was taken by senior managers who believed that it would enhance recruitment to the programme. The weekly attendance involved a lot of classroom based activities and discussion. The challenge for the course team was to ensure that students on blended learning course didn't lose out in terms of the quality of support and student experience.The team set out to develop critical friendship groupings based on Rogerian principles, i.e. empathy, openness, transparency, equality, respect, communication, honesty, integrity maturity and commitment (Rogers, 1965). The way that the face to face sessions was organised was to explicitly address Tuckman's (1965) stages of group formation storming, norming, forming and performing.

Established practice
The weekly attendance model of course delivery involved a lot of classroom based activities and discussion which support development of confidence as well as building a community amongst the students.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage
The e-learning delivery provides flexibility in attendance but required careful planning to avoid becoming focused on delivery of material and losing the social aspects of learning as well as providing opportunities for learning from peers. Considerable attention was paid to developing critical friendship groups through the activities undertaken at the day schools. Activities were set for the friendship groups to undertake between sessions, e.g. to share a draft of an assignment with the group and offer supportive feedback on one another's work. Face to face time was allocated to discussing the value of the friendship groups and, where students hadn't participated, it was possible to review the reasons and discuss how to resolve these non-participation issues. Students were then able to re-commit to the friendship groups.

E-learning was used to facilitate the critical friendship groups through swapping email addresses. Activities based on sharing resources were designed using wiki based tools. Students could therefore see the value in contributing to the wiki as there was some real benefit to them in accessing resources that other students had contributed.

Key points for effective practice
When translating a face to face course to a blended delivery the danger might be to focus on content that needs to be covered to deliver the learning outcomes. However the formation of supportive critical friendship groups alongside more formal academic aims provides a balance between formal and informal aspects of learning being emphasised in the online environment.

The main challenge has been the need for tutors and students to become confident in their ability to problem solve difficulties when using the VLE.

Conclusions and recommendations
When redesigning programmes for online or blended learning attention needs to be paid to supporting informal and social aspects of learning. One mechanism described in this study is that of critical friendship groups. The process of group formation drawn from Tuckman's (1965) work whilst following principles of person centred approaches (Rogers, 1965) supported the development of these groups.

Allocating time for the group to work through the stages of the Tuckman model was essential to ensure that that they developed to be effective mechanisms for supporting students.

Additional information: Sources

Rogers, C. R. (1965) Client-Centered Therapy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Tuckman, Bruce (1965). "Developmental sequence in small groups". *Psychological Bulletin*, 63 (6): 384–99.