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Assignment 2: Position Paper

A Case for Human Intervention in Distance Education Student Support

This paper presents an argument for the need of human intervention in distance education student support. Anderson (2004) sees machines as taking over professional staff support interventions. Examples of human intervention needed in student support areas such as library reference services, tutoring, counseling, advising, and staff development are presented. Technology can provide transactional support for registration services. However, other areas of student support are more complex and require professional staff. Looking at the need for student support in distance education, human interventions provide a quality experience for learners, and this is important because cost effectiveness cannot represent the sole criteria in future planning of support interventions.

Anderson (2004) believes that “the mix of human supplied and machine automated services will likely continue to merge in favour of more provision of support provided anytime anywhere by machines” (p. 104). Anderson (2014) discusses how machine mediated student support provides a efficient, cost effective solution. The argument concludes that many times the provision of future student support will take place “without human intervention of professional staff” (Anderson, 2014, p. 104).

The student author does not fully concur with Anderson’s view. Anderson (2014) asks distance educators to embrace a future where technology plays a primary role in student support. The student author believes that human intervention will always provide an equally important part in student support as the automation of some functions can negatively impact service quality.

Librarians at the Ross School of Business furnish reference service via instant messaging (Doan & Ferry, 2006). Eight librarians, twelve support staff as well as temporary staff support approximately 856 fulltime students and 1,400 part-time students (Doan & Ferry, 2006). This reference service received positive feedback from students and plans to extend the hours of coverage are under consideration (Doan & Ferry, 2006).

Tutor.com provides an example of live personal student support (Hill, Madarash-Hill, & Allred, 2007). Tutor.com furnishes librarians to answer student questions during night and weekend hours using phone and email (Hill et al., 2007). Students surveyed on the tutor.com service rated 80% or higher on the dimensions of speed, quality of answers, friendliness, and overall service (Hill et al., 2007). When asked about willingness to use the service again, 93% reported that they would (Hill et al., 2007).

Professional services provided at regional support centers include tutoring and counseling services in distance education institutions (Rajesh, 2011). The tutors at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) regional support centers primarily provide face-to-face academic student support (Rajesh, 2011). “Academic counsellors are the pivotal link between the ODL institution and isolated distance learners in IGNOU” (p. 98) contributing information, advise, and counsel to students (Kishore, 2014).

Online advising yields another example of live personal student support (Britto & Rush, 2013). The Lone Star College System’s online portal allows students to chat with advisors in real-time (Britto & Rush, 2013). Students reported ratings of 90% and higher on the dimensions of quality of answers, overall knowledge, and ease of process. Traditional campus students even asked to participate in this well-received online advising program.

Owusu-Mensah, Anyan, and Denkyi (2015) add another example of human intervention in the form of staff development. A survey of the distance education program at the University of Education in Winneba, Ghana revealed that study center administrators required additional training to properly support distance education learners (Owusu-Mensah et al., 2015). The recommendations include regular in-service training to improve this situation (Owusu-Mensah et al., 2015).

The student author believes technology affordances bring value in transactional areas of student support such as registry and can supplement professional services. In this paper many of the human interventions required technology such as computers, instant messaging, email, phone, and chat. However, the expertise and experience that professional staff provide as discussed in this paper are a valuable resource in a distance education student support model that the student author believes technology can never fully replace.

The role technology plays in student support comprises the fundamental difference between Anderson’s outlook and that of the student author. The student author believes technology enables human beings to work more efficiently. Anderson makes a stronger case that machines will continue to replace human beings in the provision of support (Anderson, 2004). “The most common means of reducing costs and increasing or maintaining access and service has, since the beginning of the industrial revolution, been to substitute the labor and services of machines for those formally supplied by human beings” (Anderson, 2004, p. 95).

In conclusion, many student support interventions require the use of human intervention. While technology enables staff to work more effectively and efficiently, technology cannot fully supplant human support. Support such as library reference services, academic tutoring and counseling, advising, and staff development require experienced and skilled staff. Anyone who has ever pressed zero to reach an operator after a frustrating session with interactive voice response systems provided in banking or retail transactions are a case in point as to why human intervention serves and will continue to serve a vital support function.

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