

EVALUATING THE RELATIVE EFFICIENCIES AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CONTACT CENTRE AND TUTOR MODELS OF LEARNER SUPPORT AT ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

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Summary

Most undergraduate courses at Athabasca University (Canada's largest distance-based, open university) are offered as individualized learning. Two different learner support models are currently used—the "Contact Centre" model and the "Tutor" model. In the School of Business, learning support services are facilitated through the use of a contact centre. Advisors provide students with general information about a wide variety of non-academic issues. If applicable, students are referred to faculty for academic assistance. Under the Tutor model, students have direct access to academic staff for a block of time once or twice a week. Students can obtain academic and administrative advice and information from academic staff, but may be required to contact the appropriate University department for assistance with administrative, technical and program planning questions. A recent study to evaluate these two different means of providing learner support explored whether students and tutors perceive either of these models as providing better learning support in terms of academic, administrative, technical, and program advice. The study also examined the relative amount of financial resources used by each model.

INTRODUCTION

Industrialized characteristics remain at the core of what Taylor (2001) described as the most recent incarnation of distance education, a fifth generation he dubbed "Intelligent Flexible Learning." Besides the relatively commonplace features found in most online learning systems, fifth generation distance education also incorporates business technologies that streamline production of instructional material and provision of student service functions. These technologies permit multiple types of media outputs from a single source document, and provide student access through online portals to services such as automated business processes and academic advice. Most importantly, individually-tailored services can be provided to an increasing number of learners with the same economic resources by using knowledge management software to reduce the need for direct, human interaction in the teaching and learning process. These software capabilities can be further leveraged by reassigning duties

traditionally performed by academics, such as student advising and providing general administrative information, to Contact Centre personnel.

Taylor's fifth generation learning model may replicate in the virtual learning environment two key attributes that accounted for the initial successes of distance education—flexibility for students and value creation for the institution, primarily in the form of reduced costs and enhanced services compared to traditional, campus-based universities.

Anderson (2003) posited the following equivalency theorem:

Deep and meaningful formal learning is supported as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher; student-student; student-content) is at a high level. The other two may be offered at minimal levels, or even eliminated, without degrading the educational experience. High levels of more than one of these three modes will likely provide a more satisfying educational experience, though these experiences may not be as cost or time effective as less interactive learning sequences. (p. 5)

To the extent that Anderson's equivalency theorem holds, a less recognized corollary of Taylor's analysis is that universities incorporating high-quality digitized instructional media into well-structured learning experiences also can disaggregate student cohorts in favour of individualized learning and still provide focused group interaction for specific purposes within a self-paced learning experience. In this way, economies of scale can be realized, costs can be reduced, the overall quality of the learning experience can be maintained, and more learner autonomy can be facilitated. Most importantly, technologically-enabled, industrialized, yet responsive organizational structures can be established to meet the future demand for university education. It is this possibility that one form of learning can be substituted effectively for another, and the resultant need to consider cost/benefit trade-offs more closely, that should encourage educators to more carefully consider how online learning is organized. The rest of this paper describes two models of individualized, distance-based study in place at a Canadian

distance and online-based university, and a framework for evaluating relative learning efficacy, effectiveness, and economic cost-benefits.

LEARNING SUPPORT AT ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

Athabasca University (AU) is located in Alberta, Canada. Since its formation in 1975 as Alberta's fourth publicly-funded university, its mission has been to reduce barriers that traditionally restrict access to university-level education for adults in Alberta, in Canada, and throughout the world. To accomplish this, the institution has adopted open access policies in its undergraduate courses—for instance, offering courses almost exclusively by distance or online education, admitting any adult regardless of prior education, arranging comprehensive transfer credit arrangements with other educational institutions, and pioneering work in prior, non-formal learning assessment for university credit. The University offers undergraduate programs in humanities, social sciences, science, business, and nursing. It offers graduate programs in business, distance education, health studies, and integrated studies.

Like traditional classroom-based universities, graduate courses offered by the University generally have fixed start and end dates. This allows a greater degree of student-to-student interaction through computer-mediated communication, for instance, but reduces the amount of time and place flexibility available to learners. Undergraduate courses, on the other hand, provide students greater freedom. Students can start “individualized study” courses at any time during the year at a location of their choosing. They can complete a course at any time within a six-month contract period. These features allow Athabasca University undergraduate students, most of whom have work, family, and other obligations, to complete university courses at their own pace.

Two different learner support models are currently used in undergraduate courses at Athabasca University— the “Tutor” model used by most undergraduate faculties and the “Contact Centre” model used in the undergraduate School of Business. School of Business

course registrations total about 15,000 annually (or about 1/3 of the University's total). At present, there are about 25 full-time faculty members in the School, over 70 part-time markers and academic experts, and about 25 full-time professional and support staff.

Under the Tutor model, part-time tutors are responsible for all aspects of interactions with a limited, pre-determined number of students. Students are able to directly interact with these academics by telephone for a block of time (usually 2 to 3 hours) once or twice a week. E-mail is increasingly used as well. Students can obtain academic and administrative advice and information from their tutor, but may be required to contact the appropriate AU department for assistance with administrative, technical, and program planning questions. There is no centrally-maintained knowledge database or record of student contacts.

Under the Contact Centre model, undergraduate student advisors, available six days a week, field initial queries via fax, telephone, or e-mail, and act as the first point of contact for accessing other advising services. Using flexible, shared, and secure contact databases, contact centre advisors handle issues for which they have established answers and refer course-related inquiries to the appropriate academic experts. Student questions are recorded. Responses are also stored within the system and are generally based on information from the knowledge library. The full history of any student or other user contact can be retrieved from the related database. About 80% of all student calls are administrative or technical in nature, meaning that the undergraduate student advisors are able to answer these directly. "Frequently-asked question" databases are also available to students and advisors to answer some academic queries. If applicable, students are referred to faculty and part-time academic experts for academic assistance. A message is posted to the appropriate academic. The academics generally check for these messages on a daily basis during the work week, and in turn respond to students by telephone or e-mail, as requested. They record the disposition of these queries in the database, so that an entire history of the contact and its resolution can be tracked.

Based on a prior year's study, the Contact Centre model offers significant economic benefits compared to the Tutor model. These savings primarily result because, under the Tutor model, tutors receive the same amount of pay regardless of how busy they are during their designated three-hour contact period. In fact, utilization rates of offsite tutors are often relatively low. This inefficiency is eliminated by introducing the Contact Centre. Activity levels are now monitored and undergraduate student advisor staffing levels are adjusted accordingly. Academic experts are paid according to total amount of actual student contact time per month, not on availability.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS

A study that evaluates these two different means of student support has been almost concluded. It has two main purposes:

- a) to explore whether students and tutors/academic experts perceive either of these models as providing better learner support in terms of academic, administrative, technical, and program advice; and
- b) to examine the relative amount of financial resources used by each model and inform future resource allocation decisions by the University.

Results of a tutor survey designed to explore perceptions of a) their roles in the student learning process and b) the relative effectiveness of each model in supporting these roles are being conducted. Initial cost calculations have as well been completed.

The survey of students who have experience with each model has been completed. Based on about 300 respondents, preliminary results indicate the following percentages of attributes as being rated "Important" or "Very Important":

Importance of getting immediate learning support under either model	78%
Importance of talking directly with an academic expert for academic support	76%
Telephone contact within first month of Contact Centre model courses	77%

Usefulness of Contact Centre contact within first month	70%
Telephone contact within first month of Tutor model courses	43%
Usefulness of Tutor model contact within first Month	77%
Receipt of Welcome e-mail at start of Contact Centre course	91%
Usefulness of Welcome e-mail at start of Contact Centre course	84%
Usefulness of Welcome e-mail at start of Tutor model course	84%
Satisfaction with response times for Contact Centre administrative support	88%
Satisfaction with response times for Contact Centre academic support	84%
Satisfaction with response times for Tutor model administrative support	87%
Satisfaction with response times for Tutor model academic support	82%

CONCLUSION

Initial results indicate that student satisfaction with the response times for academic and administrative support provided by the Contact Centre or Tutor models are not significantly different. Means of first contact seems to be more effective under the Contact Centre model. Initial cost calculations indicate that the Contact Centre model is at least \$60 per registration lower than the Tutor model. Taken together, these results suggest that satisfactory educational experiences can be delivered under either model. Given this equivalency of outcomes, it is recommended that relative costs should primarily determine how student support is provided at Athabasca University.

References

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