

Moments of Truth: Managing the face-to-face Encounter in Distance Learning

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INTRODUCTION Managing distance learning shares many of the features of managing anything. Fundamentally the process involves planning, implementation and evaluation. Managing a service differs, however, from managing the manufacture of a good or product. When viewed in service management terms, distance education provision, as the following quotation suggests, involves managing 'unique characteristics'.

For services the presence of the customer in the process materially alters what is viewed as the product. The unique characteristics of intangibility, perishability, and simultaneous provision and consumption introduce special challenges for service management (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 1994, 33).

Not only does a service differ from a manufactured good in that it may not be tangible, may not last and cannot therefore be stored or inventoried, but it usually relies on the involvement of the customer. Hence, pivotal to the distance education service is the management of a variety of interactions between service provider (distance educator) and customer (student). The central goal is to provide effective learning outcomes. It is the human dimension of the service which presents educators with the greatest challenge as they attempt to manage an interface which is potentially volatile and often unpredictable, relying as it does on human involvement for a successful outcome. That is

why this encounter of customer and service provider is known as a 'moment of truth' in the service being delivered (Normann, 1991; Carlzon, 1987). At that point of contact, the service is being judged as a success or a failure by the students.

The traditional focus of the distance education literature is distance and separation rather than close encounters. The emphasis is on the challenge faced by a student working independently and often alone, removed from close proximity to the teacher, a 'noncontiguous education' (Rumble, 1989, 28). Because of this, distance educators have become accomplished at producing the illusion of closeness while operating under the constraints imposed by distance.

Literature relating to the educator's role highlights such subjects as the preparation of course materials, methods of long distance communication, the relative merits of campus courses and the role of face-to-face teaching in distance learning. However, techniques for face to face interaction have been somewhat overlooked in favour of the exploration of distance rather than proximity.

In the delivery of the service of distance education the 'moments of truth' are mediated by a diverse range of technology: print, computer, telephone, video, or through an intermediary such as a centralised administration service. As previously mentioned, the benefits and disadvantages of

many of these media have been well-researched and discussed in the distance education literature. The objective with the use of technology is often to replicate the 'human face' aspect of the service which is missing when student and educator are geographically separate. Such techniques as Holmberg's (1989) print-mediated 'guided didactic conversation' or the linking of students through internet to 'talk' to one another (Mercer, 1993), or the sophisticated explorations of new applications for virtual reality technology (Hart, 1991) are all ways of creating an illusion of a human encounter. Indeed, in service management terms the likelihood of a service failure is considerably less when managed in the 'back office' (Lovelock, 1992) via technology away from the 'front stage' where real live human beings interact often without a script. So why do distance educators run the risk of a face-to-face encounter at on-campus courses? What are the advantages of the residential or regional courses? How does the face-to-face encounter fit into the overall service and how best might it be managed to ensure success?

THE VALUE OF THE FACE TO FACE ENCOUNTER The intention of the regional or residential course is not only to provide extra material, additional support or enhanced understanding but also to relieve the sense of isolation the students feel owing to their geographic remoteness or choice of distance learning mode. While students naturally assess the quality of the course by the course materials, the campus course provides another arena in which to judge service quality. Meeting customer expectations in this as in other facets of the course is vital to the student's overall perception of the value of the course.

The challenge for distance educators is two-fold: to justify the needs for on-campus activities in their particular disciplines; and to plan those activities so that they are enriching, challenging, motivating and achieve their educational objectives for all their students (Warner and Wilkinson, 1992, 4).

Within the distance mode, educators become accustomed to the safety of the geographical remoteness. After extended intervals of technology-mediated interaction (often print) teachers can be reluctant to commit themselves to a campus course, or are shocked to find themselves communicating 'eyeball to eyeball' with their students. This interaction involves a different relationship and different skills. Consequently, recognising the crucial importance of a successful encounter is one thing, but ensuring that it happens is another. The 'protagonists' (student and educator) come with their own set of expectations and fears. How can the needs of each be best met within the encounter?

In the first place it is helpful to tease out the dimensions of the situation with which we are dealing. Then we can suggest a method of managing the service delivery face-to-face. In this paper we advocate team teaching as a means of ensuring that campus courses meet the criteria set down by Warner and Wilkinson: that they be 'enriching, challenging, motivating and achieve their educational objectives'. But team teaching, we argue, can go beyond the provision of an enhanced learning experience for students to provide a supportive teaching environment for educators. We draw on our own experience and practice to examine and illustrate strategies and techniques for successful interaction.

UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

Understanding customer expectations is a prerequisite for delivering superior service; customers compare perceptions with expectations when judging a firm's service (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithamal, 1991, 39).

In order to plan for a successful encounter, any organisation offering a service needs to know what their customers expect. It is not enough to think or assume this knowledge. What then does the student expect from the on-campus course? For many students, the campus course is an intense personal experience. It is an expensive

exercise in terms of money spent on several levels: for themselves, their employers and their families. This theme of 'financial disadvantage' figured in the responses of five hundred students at the University of Central Queensland in the study carried out by Warner and Wilkinson (1992). But there is another cost to the student, that of time. The student does not want to feel that his or her time has been wasted, that it has not been accorded the same priority as that of the educational service provider. Stealing the customers' time or 'time larceny' (Stayt, 1989) can quickly undermine the relationship between student and educator especially if the on-campus course is a compulsory requirement.

Furthermore, beside the financial and time costs there are certain discomforts which students must endure. They are often housed in relatively spartan accommodation, in a strange town without transport where there are all sorts of limitations being put on their freedom. The classroom or lecture theatre physically confines them for long periods, and the programme is highly scheduled and finely tuned in order to optimise the time use.

Academic expectations may well include a chance to clarify issues and resolve questions and concerns they have about the course content. They may anticipate personal involvement in the course and wish to make their own contribution. Additionally, the on-campus or regional course provides an alternative forum in which the student is likely to judge the academic and personal credibility of the lecturer (McIlroy and Walker, 1992).

On an emotional plane, the student may face certain anxieties, mostly relating to the fear of the unknown. The apprehension may relate to such matters as how they will compare with other students in terms of knowledge in the field or prior experience as a student or professional. Distance students are used to a relatively secluded study environment and the prospect of a group experience might be daunting. Additionally, these students may have chosen distance education for reasons of flexibility and

autonomy, preferring self-paced learning. These students prefer to be taught at a distance and, for some, the campus course will be an intrusion into their personal and work life, 'a necessary evil which they have to endure because they wish to study a particular discipline' (Warner and Wilkinson, 1992,4). These factors, possibly compounded with a past bad experience of either campus courses or of learning generally, can cause a negative predisposition which is in danger of confirmation if the face-to-face encounter is not managed so as to be immediately rewarding.

Of course, the preconceptions will not all be negative. Within any group of people, the expectations will vary and, for many, the apprehension will be mixed with promise. This offers hope to the educator who is also likely to hold preconceptions, expectations, fears, anxieties and misgivings about the challenge that lies ahead. The educator's qualms are, however, likely to be of a slightly different order.

THE EDUCATOR AS SERVICE PROVIDER

As in any service, the role of the educator is pivotal to the success of the encounter; there is a clear link between customer satisfaction and service provider satisfaction, that is, unhappy employees adversely affect customer perceptions of the service (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991). If the teacher is not accustomed to teaching in the face-to-face mode and has not developed the appropriate skills, the very immediacy of the potential encounter can create a sense of foreboding.

Time is perhaps one of the most influential elements in this anxiety experienced by the educator, both because on-campus course preparation is time-consuming and because the intensity of the programme presupposes considerable time pressures. Within a very short period educators must capture the interest and win the support of each individual and the group as a whole if the learning exchange is to be positive and fruitful. They know that their credibility is going to be disproportionately tested against their performance in what they might consider to be a comparatively minor part

of the course. The management of time figures prominently in the literature on the management of a service which in itself is a 'perishable commodity' (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 1994, 28). Failure to manage time can result in loss of quality for the customer and loss of revenue for the organisation. While not usually regarded as a successful businessman, Abraham Lincoln certainly grasped the essentials of inventory management in the provision of a professional service; 'time and expertise' comprised a lawyer's 'stock in trade' (Lovelock, 1992, 155).

Lastly, the educator can be subject to information constraints which limit knowledge of important matters such as the likely number of campus course participants. This affects their confidence, as planning must incorporate considerable flexibility and provide for a range of contingencies. Another associated and very real concern for the educator is their feeling of vulnerability. This stems partly from the sheer ratio of student numbers to one teacher, partly from a seasoned belief that there is bound to be at least one individual present in the group who seems intent only on discrediting or undermining the course or its messenger and, as with their student counterparts, partly from the fear of the unknown.

All of these considerations serve to heighten the teachers' awareness of their own limitations and to undermine their confidence in their abilities and in the value of the course. Even lecturers hardened by regular exposure to large classes of undergraduate students can find the encounter with mature distance students daunting.

IMPLEMENTATION: ADDING VALUE TO CONTENT So the question arises, how can distance educators faced with an on-campus course optimise their skills and address the students' diverse expectations? One way of managing this face-to-face encounter and minimising risk is to implement the teamwork solution, not unfamiliar in distance education where teams, utilised for course development and preparation, have had advantages for staff

development (Jevons, 1984). Both parties' fears can be countered and expectations met through a carefully planned and executed programme which relies on more than one presenter. There are several advantages that team presentation has over individual presentation. Not least of these is the potential for sheer variety.

Visual stimuli and auditory diversity are demanded by today's media-influenced audiences. Television has conditioned audiences to expect interactive presentation of news, sports and gameshows by two or more hosts. The use of dual presenters reduces boredom and maintains interest level as the presenters share the spotlight, interacting with each other to add value to the content. Similar advantages accrue when two or more presenters interact in an educational context. The variety of presentation style that two or more people can bring heightens involvement and enhances the learning experience. An important additional outcome is that the credibility of the course content is bolstered and students are reassured when the authority of one specialist is supported by another (McIlroy and Walker, 1992).

On a more pragmatic note, students regard the presence of a course team as 'value for money' – a better deal. This notion is reinforced by the fact that the operation runs more smoothly. Gaps and hesitations can be dealt with or smoothed over with humour, difficult questions can be better interpreted or even deflected, practical assistance is on hand to deal with handouts, overheads or technology breakdowns. In short, the encounter can be managed to optimise personal satisfaction and the learning outcomes.

THE VALUE OF TEAMWORK FOR THE EDUCATOR Contemporary management literature teems with exhortations to practitioners to embrace teamwork as this heading in a recent issue of *New Zealand Business* illustrates: 'Teams power productivity' (Shannon, 1994). The advantages are spelt out (Parker, 1990), the organisational benefits and managerial implications of self-managing work teams are explored (Banner, Kulisch and Peery, 1992). Teams play a vital role in implementing quality

management programmes (Ripley and Ripley, 1992). Today's manager is exhorted to play the role of coach (Stayer, 1990). This team ideology, reflected, or perhaps grounded, in our cultural pastimes, has long been espoused by education and has subsequently been carried over into other areas of endeavour. However, it would be fair to say that not everyone has jumped on the team bandwagon. Sinclair (1992, 611) argues that 'people at work have been tyrannised by a team ideology' and that there are many problems inherent in adopting such a philosophy without an awareness of its shortcomings or critical evaluation of the underlying assumptions.

We have applied teamwork when delivering an educational service to distance students. Indeed, we have found that there are advantages as well as disadvantages for both the educator and the student. First, in addressing the positives, one of the reasons most commonly advanced in defence of group work versus individual work, is that 'two heads are better than one'. Buchholz and Roth (1987, 13) have taken this a step further by concentrating on the resultant synergy which can come from people working together. People jointly will achieve greater results than individually when they enter what they have termed the 'zone of inspiration'.

As team teachers we have not only experienced the synergy described above but are very aware of many other benefits that accrue from working closely with another person. There is an increased confidence in the thoroughness of course preparation when the details are shared. Confidence also results from the knowledge that any weak areas can be covered by the other and that any gaffe or bungle can often be handled by the other person ('Mary did not mean that your answer was inadequate but that you need to explore it a bit further'). There is also the likelihood that the teaching pace will be monitored ('Hold on, Robyn, I'm not sure that everyone has grasped that concept'). In the same way, any assumptions will be challenged and any oversights remedied.

Any presenter who has had to face the same group for one or two days will know only too

well that at some stage there can be an overwhelming sense of boredom with the sound of his or her own voice. This is usually accompanied by a powerful feeling of aloneness, the 'them and me' syndrome. Sometimes this can actually lead to a defensiveness, quite uncalled for, if a student questions or challenges. Working in a team can eradicate or drastically reduce this likelihood. Instead, there is a freshness or vitality from working in a participative and supportive environment.

Additionally, working in a team reduces the presenter's awareness of his or her own limitations or the limitations of the course. In the troubleshooter role, fellow team members can assist with any problems or personality clashes by offering advice or by taking responsibility for handling them, or by diffusing situations. Many of these benefits considerably reduce the teacher's sense of vulnerability. A more open and relaxed teaching manner usually ensues, considerably increasing the chances of a satisfactory encounter for the student.

DISADVANTAGES OF TEAM TEACHING

Nevertheless, the likely advantages of teamwork outlined above can be countered by some potential disadvantages. Sinclair (1992, 618) sums up many of these in the following subtitle to a section of her article: 'Power, conflict and emotions as subversive forces in work groups'. In other words, team teachers have to address questions of dominance and power plays. An openness to confront assertively is essential if such matters as conflict are to be resolved. If one team member is apathetic or uncooperative or unwilling to take responsibility, then the likelihood of such problems undermining the group effort are high. Another probable cause of dissension springs from a lack of confidence on the part of one team member. They may have a sense of exposure, of being defenceless in front of colleagues, or of having any mistakes or errors brought into stark relief by their 'more competent' partner. Solitary teaching guarantees that the teacher is protected from the rigour of peer scrutiny.

Conflict needs to be managed if team teachers present contradictory material. While, on the negative side, this can prove an opportunity for a power trip by one person, it can, alternatively, clearly enhance the learning outcome if couched in reasonable terms such as 'Mary comes at this from a different perspective to me'.

Finally, the usual disadvantages attributed to any group decision-making process can apply to team teaching. Time is the obvious one. Time must be spent in communication and preparation and the institution has to be prepared to resource two or more staff when previously one person would have been considered 'adequate'. Similarly, the security induced by team participation might lead to the individuals feeling less personal responsibility for an undesirable outcome.

Certainly, we do not claim that team teaching is for everyone, nor is it a panacea. An unthinking acceptance of 'teamthink' could clearly result in the difficulties so succinctly outlined by Sinclair. A poorly coordinated attempt at team presentation can undermine the perceived quality of the course and exaggerate any shortcomings, even creating problems which would not otherwise exist. We have tried, therefore, to alert the reader to the destructive potential of any such attempt at group work.

When it is done well, however, team teaching has substantial advantages for both the learner and the educator, providing an enhanced experience for all. An effectively functioning team will lead to a more energised, more creative and more enriching experience. As any manager knows, planning the teamwork is one way of ensuring a successful outcome.

PLANNING FOR SUCCESSFUL TEAMWORK Planning the encounter has worked well for us and helped us refine our working partnership. Likely problem areas need to be anticipated so that possible solutions can be considered and planning implemented. In our experience there are two clearly defined areas that need to be addressed: the 'front stage' and the 'back office', mentioned earlier as useful

concepts in managing operations in service organisations (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 1994). Front stage is visible to the customer and usually involves interaction between service provider and customer (face-to-face teaching), while back office operations are removed from the immediacy of the interpersonal encounter (for example, preparation of course materials).

PLANNING FOR THE FRONT STAGE The face-to-face encounter demands preparation at the interpersonal level as well as delivery of the content. Team members need to prepare themselves psychologically for the shared experience of interacting as a team with the students. Educators do not have to like one another, but they do need to respect one another and be prepared to show this to the students. Any personality differences can be managed by a deliberate focus on the task at hand. Creating a shared goal can overcome any likely ego problems. Assertive interpersonal skills are essential. There needs to be a preparedness to check out or confront in a non-threatening manner by using 'I' statements and avoiding 'you' blaming statements. Affirmation as well as constructive criticism are invaluable when debriefing or evaluating a session.

Facing the fact that teamwork can raise issues of power means that team members can plan to demonstrate an equal relationship. This is made visible to the students by the simple rule that both or all team members talk authoritatively at the first session. This does not mean that team members are introduced by name only but that they share the spotlight 'front stage' at the outset. If one team member is more extroverted plan for 'off stage' times where the dominant person is moved off the scene and given jobs to do to keep them busy.

Planning the face-to-face encounter bears some resemblance to choreography. The programme requires detailed planning with realistic time-frames allotted to everyone and everything. Integration must be planned for as team members link any separate sessions to what has preceded and what is to follow. This assumes a working knowledge of the other's material.

Linking ploys can be as simple as: 'As Robyn said before...'; 'I agree with Mary when she said...'; 'Just to add another perspective to what Robyn said...'; 'This may contradict what Mary said before'. Likewise, students respond well to a foreshadowing of what is to come: 'Robyn will look at this later in more detail...'; 'This fits in to what Mary will touch on later'.

Effective team teaching relies on a conscious planning for solidarity. When students direct questions at one person, the other team members can become involved, especially if clarification of the question is needed or help with the answer is required! Plan to support the other person visibly by recording main points from a discussion on the whiteboard or assisting with the overhead projector or video. It is very useful to prepare a duet now and then, which may take the form of a poem performed together for light relief. Taking responsibility for the direction of the discussion can also reinforce a sense of solidarity: 'Are you planning to talk about such and such now or later, Mary?'; 'Time's up, Robyn... she gets so enthusiastic about theorists'.

PLANNING BACK OFFICE OPERATIONS

We have developed practical strategies to enhance the team image even when removed from the face-to-face interaction. Any handouts are signed as a team and the order of names is deliberately varied. All course materials are vetted by team members as a quality check. This does not mean reinventing the wheel but that one member can have primary responsibility for a particular task while the other proof reads and makes contributions. By varying the major responsibility for drafting new material the time-consuming aspect involved in writing material together is avoided. The workload (both administration and teaching) needs to be fairly shared otherwise insidious resentment can erode the relationship.

Team teaching can provide educators with invaluable occasions for staff development if team members use such opportunities to develop their teaching skills by asking for feedback. With the safety net and back-up of another teacher, new techniques can be trialled

and evaluated. Student feedback is also, of course, an important way to monitor new teaching techniques.

Earlier it was mentioned that teamwork can result in a synergy which can be described as a 'zone of inspiration' (Buchholz and Roth, 1987). Eight attributes which have stood the test of time and are shared by teams performing in this zone of inspiration have been delineated by Buchholz and Roth. It is interesting to compare the techniques and strategies we have developed over time and from trial and error with their list: participative leadership; shared responsibility; aligned on purpose; high communication; future focused; focused on task; creative talents; rapid response.

CONCLUSION This paper has accepted that the provision of distance education involves the management of a service comprising 'moments of truth' where the student and educator interact. It is common wisdom that course content cannot stand alone. Each learner will interact differently with the material and the means of delivery will inevitably affect the learning experience. Similarly, the educator brings to the learning situation a range of skills, strengths and weaknesses. The face-to-face encounter on campus is often an important and sometimes vital component of a distance education course in terms of content, but it also holds the potential to 'make or break' a course in terms of the students' perception of service quality. The management of the face-to-face encounter must be focused on planning, implementation and evaluation. We have argued that team teaching holds the potential to address some of the difficulties inherent in courses which rely on a campus course component. From our own experience as team teachers we have provided some techniques and strategies which we have combined to form the favourable circumstances needed to manage a successful 'moment of truth'.

NOTES

¹ Normann first used this term in the late 1970s. People often mistakenly attribute it to Carlzon who popularised the notion.

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