

Peer Support on Distance Learning Programmes

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Abstract

There is a wealth of literature to support the theory that learning can be seen as social (Vygotsky, 1978) and learning can be successfully facilitated when with peers (Gunawardena and McIsaac, 2004) and operating within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Whilst this relates to face-to-face learning, does the same apply to students who are studying online? From the 1980s to the present day, technological developments and changes in attitudes towards learning led to social constructivist distance education pedagogies. (Anderson and Dron, 2011). Distance learning programmes can utilise the information and communication technology available to offer online learning (Srijamdee and Pholphirul, 2020). However, distance learning can be seen as an isolated activity due to the lack of direct engagement with other pupils and lecturers (Booker, 2016). Such a view is in direct contrast to the social aspect of learning. Nevertheless, distance learning can be seen as both social and individual as it is about networked individualism in which students co-evolve and learning spreads (Wellman, 2002). Previous research by the author (Bell and Ross 2022) indicates that distance learning students view their personal academic tutor as the main point of contact for support on the programme, however how does the social aspect of learning with their peers fit into the dynamics? The research focuses on a teacher training distance learning programme to explore the support mechanisms of peers whilst studying at a distance and the role fellow students play within the learning on the programme.

Keywords: Community of practice, social constructivism, Vygotsky, social learning