

Tutoring on-line

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Background/Definitions

Within Higher Education, tutoring is considered to be adult-to-adult guidance within a specific course/subject for the clear purpose of advancing learning competence in an area of study. Generally a tutor is an academic, lecturer or professor who has responsibility for teaching in a degree/diploma programme in a university or vocational teaching and learning setting. In distance learning, tutors may be recruited specifically for the role of teaching and supporting students through online tutoring. In this instance the tutor requires excellent online communication skills to guide students who may study totally online without face-to-face contact with the tutor.

Tutoring online refers to the process of tutoring within an online virtual environment or networked environment where teachers and learners are separated by time and space. These online environments usually involve the use of learning management systems (other names in use, see and link to learning environments pages) such as Moodle, Sakai, WebCT, Blackboard. Online tutors often determine the culture and tone of the online learning environment.

Tutoring is also referred to as e-moderation and facilitation to achieve goals of independent learning, learner autonomy, self-reflection, knowledge construction, collaborative or group based learning, online discussion, transformative learning and communities of practice (Salmon, 2004; Benson, 2001; Mezirow, 2000; Schon, 1987; Wenger, 1998). These goals of moderation are based on principles of constructivist or social-constructivist principles of learning. E-moderation is a term synonymous with tutoring online. Peer tutoring involves peers within a course/subject tutoring each other for the mutual benefit of learning an area of study.

From the very beginning of online tutoring, researchers recognised that there is a pedagogical (educational) role, a social support/group development role, a managerial role and, usually to a lesser extent a technical support role to be fulfilled by someone.

Current state of the art

Tutoring online assumes a self-motivated and independent learner. Learning is a key focus of the process as opposed to teaching. E-moderating usually refers to group online or web based learning.

- Based on constructivist and social-constructivist principles
- Tutoring online focuses on utilising online dialogue and peer learning to enrich learning within the online environment.
- Focus is on achieving goals of independent learning, learner autonomy, self-reflection, knowledge construction, collaborative or group based learning, online discussion, transformative learning and communities of learning as opposed to delivering online content via a transmission mode.

Implications for practice

Tutoring online is different from tutoring in a face-to-face setting

What is the same?

- Group dynamics
- Need for leadership and other group roles, these emerge less readily online
- Designing for interaction

What is different?

- Online groups need much more help to structure their discussions
- In asynchronous learning environments, participants need to log on many times to take part

Tactical and Strategic Online Tutoring

There is a spectrum of intervention in online discussions from occasional guidance to full scale design and support of learning groups and tasks. Tactical tutors may respond to online interaction at critical moments needing:

- Skill in recovery if things go wrong
- Sensitivity
- Time

Strategic tutors do more prior planning including:

- Group size
 - the smaller the size the greater likelihood of trust but less variety and mix
 - 15 people is the max any one online tutoring can handle with full participation
 - 6 is the least that leads to good online group work (See Jacques and Salmon 2007 pages 159-67)
- Group membership
 - Heterogeneous mix provides for interaction and task achievement
 - Online tutor needs to manage initial time lags of members joining groups

Design for Group learning

The prior design of activities (e-tivities) is strategic and promotes peer group learning and results in less online tutoring time. Online tutors need to optimise student engagement through authentic and relevant learning activities (<http://www.e-tivities.com>).

E-tivities are structured participative group work online. They are based on one key topic, activity or question to make online e-moderating easy and effective and learning motivating, engaging and purposeful. Key features for use of e-tivities asynchronous bulletin boards are:

1. Illustrative title
2. Small piece of stimulus or challenge (the spark)
3. An invitation to post a message for the individual participant
4. Plan for timings
5. Interactive or participative postings (respond to others)

6. Summary, critique or feedback from the e-moderator

Similar approaches can be taken using podcasts (Salmon and Edirisingha 2008) and Second Life (www.le.ac.uk/moose).

Scaffolding

Online tutors need to be aware of the stages learners usually move through in the online environment. Salmon (2004) suggests five stages for scaffolding learning:

1. access and motivation
2. online socialization
3. information exchange
4. knowledge construction
5. development

<http://www.e-moderating.com>

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-lliance/projects/moose/mooseblog/moderator/master.pdf>

Critical success factors

Training and Development

Staff who are inexperienced online will inevitably try and transfer what works for them, or what they believe is the only way for their discipline.

The values embedded in many commonly used VLEs leave a residue that is transmissive rather than constructed and adds to the banality, confusion, disappointment, in online the learning and teaching experiences. Online tutors must be trained and developed in their role as they otherwise waste a great deal of time and their students' satisfaction is low.

Key competencies needed:

- supporting group learning within the technology without the need for face to face meetings or pictures
- understanding scaffolding
- understanding online behaviours
- weaving
- summarising
- giving feedback
- classifying participants knowledge
- adding knowledge and correcting misconceptions in a timely manner where necessary
- closing off discussions and moving on

Key features for staff development:

- Train online for online working
- Model the posting behaviours expected of participants/students
- Focus on online tutoring/e-moderating role and communication (not technology)

- Use scaffolding to demonstrate moving from directed instruction to networked learning
- Focus on peer dialogue around transferable models
- Provide practice especially in weaving, summarising and feedback

Summarising:

- Acknowledge the variety of ideas and contributions
- Refocus discussion, especially where postings are numerous or straying
- Signal closure
- Provide fresh starting points
- Reinforce important contributions or ideas
- Provide archive

Weaving:

- Emphasize a point to show wider application
- Collect snippets up from different message and/or present in new way
- Highlights a contribution that links with others that the group hasn't noticed
- Agree or disagree
- Correct misunderstandings or insufficiency

How not to do online tutoring:

1. Gush with little content
2. Disappear without explanation
3. Respond to every message
4. Do not summarise, weave or add learning points
5. Ignore some participants and focus on others
6. Response only at a surface level (oh yes, good)
7. Respond only a deep level (show off your greater knowledge)
8. Manipulate

Self-led Teams

As students become more experienced at working together online, some of the online facilitation roles can be handed over to them. However they will need advice and training to be successful collaborators.

Include:

- Establishing ground rules
- Developing a shared sense of vision and purpose
- Allocating roles, task and responsibilities
- Communicating openly and frequently
- Offering support
- Meeting deadlines
- Reviewing their performance and reflecting on contributions (Jacques and Salmon 2007; Salmon and Lawless 2006)

A Sense of presence

Online, some cues that are important to learners are missing. For example in the commonest medium- text based asynchronous conferencing- facial expressions, body movements and eye contact are missing and take some getting used to for some people. It's important not to over compensate and believe that a face to face meeting is essential- instead to work the features of the environment that do add value- e.g. time to reflect, opportunity to prepare a message in advance, choice of logging on time (Garrison and Anderson 2003).

Web 2.0

Web.2.0 is the use of the web in increasingly more interactive ways with user content being critical important (O'Reilly 2005).

Online tutors may use many applications of web 2.0 to enhance their online tutoring in more flexible and up to date ways :e.g. podcasts with the advantage of the human voice, ease of use and mobility (Salmon and Edisingha 2008), or blogs providing 'hot knowledge' – often excellent for debate (xxx).

Research is just beginning on the use of multi-user virtual environments (e.g. Second Life) and the role of avatar as Second Life tutors and as participants as avatars ((ref) Salmon 2006).

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Further reading

<http://otis.scotcit.ac.uk/onlinebook/>

http://www.fastrak-consulting.co.uk/tactix/Features/perfect_etutor.htm

http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html

<http://www.e-moderating.com>

<http://www.e-tivities.com>

<http://www.learninggroups.com>

<http://www.podcastingforlearning.com>

<http://www.le.ac.uk/moose>

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