

GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE TUTORS

E-tutoring can be defined as teaching, support, management, and assessment of students on programmes of study that involve a significant use of online technologies. The capabilities required can be quite different to face-to-face teaching both in terms of integrating appropriate forms of technology into learning activities and in managing and supporting students' online learning.

The purpose of this guide is to assist lecturers in identifying the key challenges of e-tutoring and to consider the skills and capabilities needed to become an effective e-tutor. Awareness of the distinctive considerations for e-tutoring coupled with a reflective approach to one's own practice should equip teaching staff with a useful set of principles for designing and delivering online courses.

Strategies for teaching online

Online learning raises important and interconnected issues for students, course developers, lecturers and senior managers. Whether e-learning strategies focus on development or on delivery of online learning, enhancement of staff capacity in e-tutoring remains fundamental to effective e-learning. Development of content (taken here to include learning activities as well as materials), interaction with students and response to learners' needs online can be very different compared to similar functions done in a classroom environment. While this is relevant for distance learning courses, it is crucial to 'blended learning' where classroom and online activities must be integrated in ways that allows them to deliver learning as a coherent and effective whole.

If teaching in online environments (and online learning) is to be successful, staff development is a key factor. Two areas are particularly crucial for becoming an effective online tutor: curriculum review for integrating ICT and the management of and support for online learners.

Considerations

- What institution-level forces drive the online learning which is being offered?
- Do you share some of these objectives in developing your own teaching?
- What are the major issues and need gaps for you or your students?

Opportunities and challenges for lecturers

Online learning supports and promotes diverse working practices for lecturers and students. A key feature of e-tutoring is to facilitate collaborative (or co-operative) learning and group working, activities which may be separated in terms of time, distance and the specific ICT tools adopted for creating, sharing and discussing work online. The ability to work from remote, multiple locations and to organise work schedules based on personal preferences can feel quite empowering, but some might need time to become used to it and it also requires planning and preparation upfront to ensure all the necessary materials are made available for online access.

Feeling comfortable and confident with the technology involved can be a daunting prospect for some lecturers. Some feel the need to develop a few fundamental but new IT skills even before considering curriculum needs. It is certainly important to feel confident in using the new tools (e.g. email or the web) before embarking on other techniques for dealing with students and groups online. However, e-tutoring covers a wide range of possible online activities and only a subset may be required in any particular situation. Any time committed might, therefore, best be targeted only at the relevant areas.

The e-tutor may be involved in selecting, designing and developing online courses as well as their evaluation, adoption and modification. However, a key role would be to deliver courses and support learners.

The key challenges that lecturers experience are: switching their role from being just an expert deliverer to being a guide and a mentor; managing workloads; managing interaction among students; motivating and supporting students (particularly those facing problems); and managing the complexities of online communication.

An increasing area of interest for online courses is problem-based or self-directed learning, which requires the online tutor to have a specific style and skills set. A major function of the e-tutor will be to facilitate effective collaborative and group working. Communication skills are therefore tested to the full in online learning and e-tutoring. Setting up an online discussion only to see it unused by students or creating unmanageable workloads for yourself can, however, be very dissatisfying. A negative experience as an online tutor might be avoided by utilising established best practice in collaborative group work.

Developing one's own skills and capabilities

The core skills of a good tutor are unlikely to change with a difference in the method of delivery. Some of these include:

- good organisation
- familiarity with the structure of the course
- subject expertise
- enthusiasm
- ability to deploy resources effectively
- good relationships with learners
- ability to communicate
- a flexible approach.

Some of the competencies required to be a good e-tutor are as follows:

Planning and management

- Plan how e-tutoring will be employed
- Establish the technical facilities necessary to support e-tutoring
- Provide administrative support
- Provide learners with technical and subject matter expertise
- Initiate activities that will facilitate learning

Communicating with learners

- Establish relationships with new learners
- Communicate appropriately with learners
- Provide learners with support and encouragement

Integrating ICT tools

- Use webpages to communicate with leaders as well as for allowing for communication among the learners
- Use email for communication with learners
- Use bulletin boards and discussion forums for communicating with learners as well as to allow communication among learners
- Use text, audio and video conferencing for communicating with students as well as to allow communicating among learners

Reflecting on student and tutor experiences

- Assess learners' performance
- Evaluate and continuously improve e-tutoring support

Choosing between communication technologies such as email, conferencing, chat or videoconferencing will depend on what is appropriate to a given learning situation, rather than a knowledge of the technologies per se. Information retrieval skills will determine whether the tutor makes good use of the easy access to web resources and whether he or she is able to evaluate the quality of materials held on remote websites.

Managing students online

The impact of time and place may cause anxieties for some lecturers as well as some students. The remoteness of the online learning environment can generate concerns about plagiarism and assessment of collaborative work. If courses are to be offered internationally, there may be further issues relating to language, culture, pedagogical assumptions, as well as transferability and accreditation.

Online tutor time is mostly front-loaded. Getting collaborative group work established is usually more demanding than keeping it active and useful. For the new e-tutor, tutor overload can be an off-putting experience. However, overload is mostly an "early adopter" phenomenon and can be spotted by three basic problems.

- too many messages (probably also true for student overload),
- messages directed solely at the tutor rather than to student groups
- ambiguities regarding tutor's responsibilities (expectations regarding attendance on conferences, frequency of log-on, pastoral and technical support)

At the start, it can often simply reflect a kind of suppressed interaction on part of the student, emerging as a result of provision of an online outlet. The overwhelming demands can, therefore, settle down over time as students become more selective about what and when they communicate online.

A useful framework is to consider the learning management's issues at various stages of the course, e.g. before, during and after the course or online activity, as deemed appropriate.

The peer-to-tutor and peer-to-peer interactions made possible through online learning can bring about tangible benefits in terms of overcoming isolation and improving the learning experience. The e-tutor must take responsibility for choosing the type of communication, encouraging and facilitating social and educational interactions and ensuring that participation is appropriate and balanced. Pedagogical input and guidance will be a key task for ensuring that the activities are initiated, steered, nurtured, monitored, summarised and concluded effectively.

Considerations

You might check the following whether clear and explicit information is provided to students in terms of:

- Course design — transparent purpose, requirements and support, peer learning
- Conference architecture — value, amounts and timeframes of online interactions in relation to different student groups or numbers
- Clear guidelines — course aims, instructions, frequency of tutor 'presence', periodic summaries, assignments

- Preparatory materials — sample materials and messages, examples of best practices
- Assessment details — clarity in requirements and wording to avoid more questions to tutors, stick or carrot, explicit marking guidelines and criteria.