



Guidelines for Online Tutors

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About the guidelines

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 (TechLearn,2000). 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' learning online.

The purpose of this guide is to assist lecturers at MCC in identifying the main challenges of e-tutoring and to consider the kinds of skills and capabilities that being an effective e-tutor might require. 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 teaching online.

Strategies for teaching online

Online learning raises important and interconnected issue for students, course developers, lecturers and senior managers. Whether e-learning strategies focus on development or delivery of online learning, the enhancement of staff capabilities in e-tutoring is a fundamental factor in whether e- learning is effective. Development of content (taken here to include learning activities as well as materials), interactions with students and response to learners' needs, online can be very different than in classroom-based teaching. This is not just relevant to distance learning courses but particularly 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. A helpful Online Tutoring briefing paper by TechLearn (2000) outlines the relevant issues for staff involved in e- tutoring. It looks at the key differences to classroom teaching, considering student support issues, pedagogical issues, tutor issues, institutional issues and some of the wider issues.

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

Considerations

- What are the institutional driving forces behind offering learning online?
- Do you share some of these objectives in developing your own teaching?
- What are the main issues and areas of need for you or your students?
- What is timely, achievable and likely to generate the most useful changes?

Opportunities and challenges for lecturers

Online learning supports and promotes different 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 numerous locations and to organise work schedules differently can be quite empowering, but may take some getting used to and 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 some basic 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 to the relevant areas.

The (e) tutor may be involved in selecting, designing, developing online courses, as well as in evaluation, adaptation and modification. However, a key role will be in delivering courses and in particular, in supporting learners. The main challenges that lecturers experience are: managing the shift in role from expert deliverer to guide and mentor; managing workloads; managing interactions between students; motivating and supporting students (particularly those having problems); and managing the complexities of online communications.

An increasing area of interest for online courses is in problem-based or self-directed learning, which requires particular skills and style from the online tutor. 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 you can however be very disillusioning. A negative experience as an online tutor might be avoided by utilising established best practice in collaborative group work.

As a starting point, the Effective Online Tutoring Guidelines (JISC) offers a very helpful level of detail in a well-structured resource. It considers broadly the role and skills of the online tutor through various stages of course design and delivery, the management of student and group communications, and instructional design for web-based teaching and learning. Many sections are backed up by useful examples of approaches taken in real courses.

Developing one's own skills and capabilities

The core skills of a good tutor are unlikely to change with a different delivery method. Some of these are:

- 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 Web pages for communication with and between learners
- Use email for communication with learners
- Use bulletin boards and discussion forums for communication with and between learners
- Use text, audio and video conferencing for communication with and between 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 as well as an ability to evaluate the quality of materials held on remote web sites.

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 (Mason, 2000):

- too many messages (probably also true of student overload),
- messages directed solely at the tutor rather than amongst student groups
- ambiguities about tutor's responsibilities (which conferences, frequency of log-ons, pastoral and technical support expected)

At the start, it can often simply reflect a kind of suppressed interaction on the part of the student that is opened up by 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 issues at various stages of the course, e.g. before, during and after the course or online activity, as appropriate.

The peer-to-tutor and peer-to-peer interactions made possible in online learning can bring clear benefits in terms of overcoming isolation and enhancing learning. The e-tutor must take responsibility for choosing the types of communications, for encouraging and facilitating social and educational interactions and for ensuring that participation is appropriate and balanced. Pedagogical input and guidance will be a key task for making sure the activities are initiated, steered, nurtured, monitored, summarised and concluded effectively, including considerations of the role of assessment.

Considerations

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

- Course design - transparent purposes, 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 good practice
- Assessment details - clarity in requirements and wording to avoid more questions to tutors. stick or carrot, explicit marking guidelines and criteria.