



Role of the online tutor in a large enrolment unit

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This paper describes effective practice in online tutoring in a first-year, large-enrolment undergraduate unit. The role of the Online Tutor is to complement face-to-face learning and to support students who are new to online learning and starting to develop independent learning skills appropriate to university study. The paper explains a set of effective practice principles for online tutoring, which underpin the role and have emerged through several iterations. The principles are discussed and exemplified, and parallels are drawn with the online tutoring qualities articulated by Macdonald (2006). Evidence for effective practice is presented in the form of usage data and student evaluations. The paper provides support for the concept of the Online Tutor as a facilitator of student independent learning in a context where the online interaction occurs primarily between students and the tutor.

Keywords: Online tutor, effective practice principles, independent learning

This paper describes principles of effective practice for online tutoring in a large enrolment, first year, blended learning unit. In contrast to approaches in which tutors mediate online or virtual tutorial groups of student-to-student discussions (e.g. Bennett, March & Killen, 2007) or work in a stepwise fashion towards students constructing their learning through collaborating with each other (e.g. Ng & Cheung, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Salmon, 2004), the Online Tutor in this unit moderates online discussions available to all students to support them to complete learning activities and assessments. The design of the Online Tutor's role recognises the challenges for first year students related to blended learning, such as those identified by Vaughan (2007): time-management, responsibility for learning, and expectations (i.e. the perception that fewer face-to-face hours equates to less work).

The blended learning unit is Introduction to the Psychology of Health, a first year undergraduate unit, which enrolls over 750 students across three campuses and serves a range of courses in the health and social sciences. While this unit and the blended learning model were described by Griffin and Thomson (2008), a brief overview is provided here as context for the Online Tutor's role. The unit provides weekly face-to-face (f2f) lectures and bi-weekly f2f tutorials, which focus primarily on supporting students to undertake required assessments. A comprehensive range of online learning activities, resources and supports complement the f2f components of the unit. The Online Tutor is integrated into the patterns and activities of the unit and plays a key, focussed teaching and learning role in facilitating students' learning related to the online learning activities and assessments. The Online Tutor's availability is distributed across the week and the semester, taking account of peak demand times, when students are off-campus in non-tutorial weeks and in the weeks leading up to assessment deadlines. (In-class tutors' employment contracts allow only for teaching of their own f2f tutorials and they are not available outside of these times.) Griffin and Thomson (2008) reported that the 'savings' from reducing in-class tutorials have been invested in online support and development of resources specific to the students' learning needs.

The Online Tutor is just one person with an allocation of the equivalent of five f2f tutorial hours. With 'associated working time', this equates to eleven hours per week, which are not only distributed across the week but are used flexibly during semester with earlier weeks being used for preparation for assignments and reviewing resources, before the peak demands leading up to assessment submission. Although the Online Tutor has several other functions, such as facilitating an online Tutors' Forum for in-class tutors, the focus of this paper is on directly supporting students through asynchronous discussion

boards to complete their learning activities and assessments. The Online Tutor, who is the second author of this paper, is an experienced f2f tutor in the unit and has played a key role, over several years, in establishing the working patterns and principles of effective practice described in this paper. The Online Tutor values the flexibility that the online role provides in allowing working hours to accommodate other work and responsibilities and the ability to work from home.

Online support is 'wrapped around' in-class learning activities (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). For example, most in-class tutorials focus on preparation for two written assessment tasks. Students use a workbook to prepare for tutorials and complete online assessed quizzes related to the workbook before tutorials. The Online Tutor's role is wrapped around these learning activities and assessments, affording students timely and responsive support for tutorial preparation and ongoing support over several weeks for assessment task completion.

Asynchronous discussion topics are structured around assessments and online learning activities. For example, there are separate discussion topics for two written assignments and online quizzes and managed threads within them. Discussions are essentially tutor-centred (rather than being primarily student-to-student), but inquiries are student-generated, identifying and requesting support for their learning needs and the Online Tutor responds to students' posts. Introduction to the Psychology of Health is the only structured blended learning these students encounter in their first year; hence the Online Tutor has a vital role in helping students adjust to the learning demands at university.

The role of the Online Tutor is to guide student learning of content through both proactive and reactive support. It is not simply Q & A; there is active teaching and learning. While the Online Tutor's role involves some mentoring and facilitating, it can be best conceptualised as coaching. According to Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz & Yang (2005) coaching is based on the cognitive apprenticeship model and involves observing learner performance, motivating, encouraging, diagnosing and directing. These qualities can be seen in the role as explained to students in FAQ format: What does the Online Tutor do? What sort of help can I ask for? When can I expect an answer? For example, students are informed that:

The online tutor is not like Ask Jeeves or Google. I won't tell you answers that you should be working out yourself but I will help you to: think things through; clarify your ideas; understand confusing concepts; locate relevant resources; find out where to find the answers or information you need. If you aren't sure if I can help you, ask anyway and I'll point you in the right direction.

The Online Tutor has been integral to the blended learning model and the role has evolved over several iterations, informed by student evaluations. The following sections show that the Online Tutor is effective in supporting students' learning through a brief overview of the evaluation data and articulation of the principles that underpin the role with other good practice models. The next section illustrates those principles, mainly through excerpts of discussion posts.

Establishing effective practice

Student evaluations

Student evaluations have informed the development of effective practice related to the Online Tutor's role, including: institutional and unit-specific surveys, anonymous discussion boards, focus groups, tracking data and tutor feedback through the Tutor's Forum. The 2008 online end-of-semester survey found the following: 62% of students considered the Online Tutor to be essential for their study (noting that online support is not compulsory and not all students use the Online Tutor in the same way); 66% thought that the discussions on assessments were useful; 82% found the online resources (to which the tutor refers students as needed) useful; and 75% stated that the discussions contained useful information. Data on 'responsiveness' are presented under that heading below. The online survey, anonymous discussion topics and an online focus group also generated qualitative feedback. Comments related to specific functions (e.g. prompt, helpful, efficient, kind, patient, valuable information) and general impressions (e.g. great, fantastic). A sample of quotes is:

- knowledgeable without giving too much away;
- quality tutoring; superior level of assistance;
- It'd be awesome if all subjects had this;

- Her feedback was very helpful and allowed us to solve the problems we had with just a nudge in the right direction not spoon feeding us which I found to be great.
- Btw, I appreciate the help you've given other students - it helped me as well. I understand now :) Thanks for your help and making it clear. YOUR THE BEST!

While quotes are necessarily selective and students use the supports differentially, there have been no recorded negative comments about the Online Tutor.

Articulation with other models

Established frameworks in the literature have also informed development of the Online Tutor's role. A framework which influenced early development of the Online Tutor's role was Oliver and Herrington's (2001) model of learning tasks, learning supports and learning resources. The Online Tutor falls into 'learning support', assisting students to work on their learning activities with reference to the designed learning resources.

An effective practice approach that was developed 'bottom up' was described by Macdonald (2006), based on work done at the Open University in Scotland and, in particular, the 'Supporting Open Learners in A Changing Environment' (SOLACE) project. Macdonald's taxonomy of quality 'interventions' were based on tutors' perceptions: Affective (confidence building); Dialogic (tailoring to student needs); Focussing (bringing study to the fore); Reflective and flexible (allowing time to think; providing for flexible working); Timely and relevant (arriving when relevant and useful); Reversionable (supporting both individual and group); and Accessible (options and alternatives). Effective practice principles have emerged through practice and in turn form the foundation of practice in the current unit. These principles reflect those articulated by Macdonald, although, as they were independently derived, they do not do so exactly. One difference is that Macdonald's tutors selected various media and communication channels (e.g. synchronous and asynchronous discussions and face-to-face and telephone contact), while the Online Tutor is only online, mediating asynchronous discussions that are wrapped around the other learning activities and modalities (although individual email communications are also used). The effective practice principles are set out in Table 1 aligned with Macdonald's quality interventions.

Table 1: The Online Tutor's practice principles aligned with Macdonald's interventions

Principles of effective practice	Macdonald's interventions
Respecting students. Valuing students as learners and individuals and respecting their circumstances, backgrounds and starting points.	Affective
Responsiveness to students' learning needs, including timeliness. Targeted and individualised support is provided, not necessarily for individual students as responses in a discussion topic can assist all students with similar issues.	Dialogic, timely & relevant, reversionable, accessible
Being encouraging and positive. Making sure that students come back to discussions by recognising their progress and what they have contributed.	Affective
Promoting independence. Assisting students to find their own answers, rather than a simple Q & A.	Focussing, reflective & flexible

An important practice principle not included above is supporting 'students at risk' of failure by tracking progress and providing extra support for students as they prepare for their assessment tasks. This is an important aspect of the role that would articulate with all of Macdonald's interventions. It is also noted that the *raison d'être* of the Online Tutor is related to Macdonald's 'focussing' as it is an accessible, available learning environment.

Examples of effective practice principles

Examples and data that support the practice principles listed in Table 1 are presented in this section. Evaluations are from 2008, as the 2009 semester had not concluded at the time of writing. Quotes and discussion post extracts, selected to illustrate the principles of effective practice, are in italics; the formats of these extracts been changed to conserve space.

Respecting students

The overarching principle is to treat all students with respect, so responses are avoided that may embarrass, humiliate or scold. Responses acknowledge students' various starting points and assume they want to learn. This not naivety; the principle is held for its utility in allowing the creation and maintenance of a productive, stimulating, friendly online environment.

Strategies for respecting students include 'keeping your word', such as providing clear guidelines about what to expect from the Online Tutor and then following them (e.g. messages will be checked and responded to twice on weekdays, once on Saturdays and not at all on Sundays) and modelling responses and expecting respect in interactions.

Student: How do u refrence reading 2?

Online Tutor: Hi Nadia, I assume you are asking me, Anne. (Please begin and end messages in these discussions with a greeting – you can find standards for posts in the communications folder.) To understand your problem I need a bit more information....Best wishes, Anne.

The Online Tutors treats all questions seriously, even though they may seem trivial or frustrating. This makes it safe for students to consider posting questions and maintains a comfortable environment for those who only read posts.

Student: I can not access the site for the SDLA's for week 1. [Self-directed Learning Activities].

Online Tutor: It can be very frustrating when things like SDLAs or readings don't open. Here are some ideas you can try ...

Responsiveness to students' learning needs, including timeliness

A regular pattern of checking posts and responding maintains a standard of responsiveness that students can rely on, promoting confident use of the e-learning site. In the two weeks leading up to submission of the first written assessment, student online 'sessions' peaked at 1080 and 1766, respectively, with 50% and 40% of activity related to the discussion topic for that assessment task. Of the 44 posts to that topic in the last week, 53% were responded to within 4 hours, and cumulatively, 73% within 12 hours and 93% within 16 hours (accounting for overnight student posts that were answered the following day). The end-of-semester evaluation survey showed that 75% students agreed that "The online tutor was available and provided timely advice and information". (This percentage includes students who regularly used the Online Tutor as well as those who did not.)

Responses to student posts are written to be informative for all students that read them. This is important because the ratio of posted to read messages in 2008 was 1:1,000. Conversely, resources developed for the larger group can be used in a personalised response. For example, FAQs developed from commonly asked questions are referred to in responses.

Student : I was just wondering if we had to use all the short term and long term effects that are in the readings?

Online Tutor: Lots of people have wondered about this so you can find an answer in "Frequently asked Questions About Assignment 1" at item 5.3 in the Assignment 1 folder ... you will find question 16 is exactly on this topic

Being encouraging and positive

The Online Tutor encourages students to: participate in discussions; engage with their studies; see themselves as capable; and to keep trying. Students are encouraged with comments like:

- Good to hear from you.
- Thanks for asking this as I think others could have been confused as well.
- It's good to see you thinking this through.
- No, it's not a dumb question.
- This sounds like you are developing your approach well, and heading in a fruitful direction.

Humour, friendliness and a personal touch also encourage students to participate.

Student: Am I on the right track with this or have I done too much uni work this weekend?? Lol. Possibly a bit of both! ☺ Please tell me if i'm on another planet.
Online Tutor: Good news: you are on the right planet!

Promoting independence

First year students are discovering the norms, protocols and skills required for academic study. In one sense, students are dependent because the discussion topics are tutor-centred; however, it is the students who generate the questions and issues that are addressed. When students make use of the Online Tutor they are taking the initiative for their learning. The Online Tutor assists students to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills required to become more independent learners. Rather than 'spoon feeding' the Online Tutor directs students to targeted, personally relevant resources, explains options and strategies and asks questions to stimulate and extend their thinking. The following example shows how the Online Tutor links students to resources and facilitates independence.

Student: One of my comments in my feedback was that i should attempt to put quotes into my own words rather than directly quoting them. I thought i was doing this in most parts of my essay but it appears not enough. If i do reword a quote do i have to reference it as i would a direct quote? and could you possibly give me an example of how i could do this?

Online Tutor: This is a really important issue and a key skill in academic writing. It is one lots of people find challenging. If you (and anyone else with this sort of feedback) can improve in this area you will be taking a big step in developing your skills. [Here tutor gives some tips and explanation about paraphrasing.] I have created a resource ... which gives you examples of exactly this. It is called "examples of paraphrasing and associated referencing". You can use this to see how it is done and some common errors to avoid.

Concluding remarks

The Online Tutor is an integral support for student learning in the blended learning model developed for Introduction to the Psychology of Health. The role is wrapped around the in-class components and assessment tasks. Student usage data and evaluations have established the utility of the Online Tutor. Effective practice principles have been operationalised over time, but the principles themselves have been foundational because, for example, without respect for students as individuals and responsiveness to their learning needs, even in large enrolment units, it would be too easy to create online and f2f learning environments that achieve neither. Resources for the Online Tutor have come from reducing f2f class time in the blended learning model. This paper illustrates that providing effective online support for student learning in a large-enrolment, first year unit delivered across three campuses, can be achieved with a modest allocation of teaching hours using asynchronous discussion boards.

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