E-tutoring
A white paper by Donald Clark
There is good evidence that learners appreciate e-tutors. Learners can find straight e-learning impersonal and yearn for some human contact. E-tutoring and other online collaborative experiences can provide this human and social dimension in learning.

E-tutors can also improve completion rates, supporting the learner through the learning experience; prompting, helping and motivating the learner to get through difficult times, get assignments in on time and generally them through to the end of the course.

There’s also a significant impact on performance. E-tutors can improve performance by improving understanding, responding to problems the learner has on specific points, challenging the learner and providing feedback.

This is all very well, but lots of things improve the process of learning and turn out to be impractical in terms of resources and costs. So before building e-tutoring into your blend of learning, consider the cost and resourcing implications.

There’s the regular and relentless email, looking at and contributing to student discussions, posting information, marking assessments and, in some cases, real-time chat.

On top of the things you are reactive to, you are also expected to be proactive, spotting when a student is having difficulty, reading between the lines and generally being on top of your cohort of learners.

A common experience is to find that lots of learner support is required at the start of the course. The good news is that it tends to ease off as students become more familiar with the system and more confident. Professor Robin Small of the Open University describes student experiences as starting off sceptically with a poor perception of online communities, later turning into a real and deep enthusiasm.

One must also be careful with the assumption that all learners want e-tutoring. Experience at the Open University has shown that, “It is usual to expect no more than a third of students to participate in discussions and activities, especially if these are not related to assignments. Another third might read the messages and not take part. Others may never look”.

Not everyone is comfortable with posting messages online. Some students report a real fear in exposing their thoughts on such a public medium, especially when they will remain visible for some time. Professor Shirley Alexander reports students describing the process as ‘nerve wracking’, and saying, “I can’t sleep after I have contributed to any discussion as I feel that I’m exposing myself”.

E-tutor roles

We must be clear about what we mean by the word ‘tutor’ in e-learning, as there seems to be no settled lexicon. We speak of online tutors, e-tutors, e-coaches, e-mentors, online facilitators, counsellors and moderators.
In Facilitating Online Learning – Effective Strategies for Moderators by Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker, a pure Socratic method is put forward, which leads the authors to prefer the term ‘moderators’.

We need to be clear at the outset that this philosophy of moderation is straight out of the Carl Rogers counselling tradition, where interventions always keep the moderator away from centre-stage. At times this is more psychiatrist’s couch than ‘real-world’. You are advised, for example, not to praise students directly, or summarise, as this puts you as a moderator, at the centre of the power relationship.

However, most practitioners prefer the more practical approach that the Open University recommends, where the tutor intervenes sensibly, with regular summaries. Not every learner and e-tutor appreciates the long-windedness of the pure Socratic method.

Many authors are also clear about their preference for ‘scheduled asynchronous’ collaboration, as opposed to synchronous events. These include Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker but also Pratt and Paloff in their Building Communities in Cyberspace. Both books recommend the considered contributions over time that result from asynchronous contacts, as opposed to the instant reactions of the synchronous model.

In education, the term ‘tutor’ often implies a knowledge of the subject. In this context, the tutor is a subject matter expert (SME), someone who actually delivers knowledge or at least helps the student understand the subject through interventions that guide them towards positive learning outcomes. This is not always the case in e-learning.

In many ways the term has been hijacked by the e-learning community and distorted to mean someone who supports e-learning in a more general sense.

This e-tutor is a jack-of-all-trades; not only mentor but facilitator, motivator, counsellor, coach, tutor, SME, administrator, assessor and even technical support person! The e-tutor uses online techniques to take the learner through the process of learning from start to finish.

As ‘deliverers of knowledge’ make the transition to ‘managers of learning’, e-tutoring will offer them the opportunity to apply their skills in new and exciting ways. Despite the distance that online technology purports to place between learner and teacher, e-tutoring is seen as the ingredient that makes the relationship more intimate.

What type of e-tutor do we require?

E-tutors can play any combination of the following roles:

- Administrator content editor and discussion moderator
- Facilitator – motivator and counsellor, managing personal development
- Subject matter expert – providing subject-specific knowledge
- Assessor – managing continuous and final assessments

It is important to be absolutely clear at the outset which combination of these roles is required of your e-tutors. This choice will determine the range of skills required and ultimately the success of the e-tutor support.

E-tutor as administrator

Do we want e-tutors to administer the learning process? This role may include setting up students into e-tutor groups, scheduling, gathering data on performance and using a learner management system.

Administration may also mean being proficient with the technology, as well as troubleshooting problems with the technology that students may encounter.

E-tutor as facilitator

Do we want e-tutors who are primarily facilitators and motivators? This was the traditional role of the personal mentor introduced from the US to the UK in the 80s. This role does not require much knowledge of the subject being taught. It requires management skills to identify and handle issues to do with personal development and learning.

The mentor in this sense is normally an experienced manager skilled in listening, observing and questioning. They are expected to challenge, check and consolidate learning and also be able to counsel correctly. Confidentiality is another feature of this form of mentoring – mutual respect, born of trust and rapport, is fundamental to the role. Just as in the classroom, the facilitator must know when to question, listen, give feedback, encourage or control.

E-tutor as subject matter expert

Do we want e-tutors who are subject matter experts? SMEs teach and provide assistance in their particular area of expertise.
Classroom trainers and academic tutors often perform this role. However, this is not as common in an asynchronous online environment, where there is a greater separation of roles, and learning content that forms a store of expert knowledge can be made accessible at any time by electronic means.

You may find that a subject-specific e-tutor can play a significant role in the development of online materials and the course itself. They will also be invaluable ongoing contributors to your interactive self-study materials, knowledge base, lists of frequently asked questions (FAQs) and other content resources.

Even as a subject matter expert you may choose to minimise repetition through referral to resources. Learners can be referred to web resources, FAQs, the knowledge base or other sources of knowledge. Spoon-feeding will turn the e-tutor into a reference tool for lazy learners. The e-tutor must pose the right questions and point learners in the right direction.

Setting up practical exercises and assignments, requesting reports and then helping the learner reflect on the experience is another role for the tutor.

The e-tutor can take the learner through the process, providing support and facilitating understanding.

**e-tutor as assessor**

Do we want e-tutors to be responsible for the assessment of learners? Continuous assessment and the encouragement of self-assessment and summative assessment are also potential e-tutor responsibilities.

Test items such as multiple choice, short essay answers, portfolio assignments, practical assignments can all be delivered to the learner by email and attachments. It is only when you need to hear (language learning, telephone skills, interviewing skills) or see someone or something (role-play, medical operations, presentation skills) that audio and video become necessary.

Remember that learners are in touch with other learners by email and have all the resources of the web and other sources when being assessed at a distance. Getting a helping hand is easy when you are online. There are over a thousand essay cheat web sites where you can buy prepared essays, which is causing a problem in higher education. To get around this you may want to add a visual or real-time component to the assessment so that you can see the candidate as he or she is being assessed. Even here the student can have multiple windows open with instant messaging to other students!

Self-assessment is in tune with a learner-centred learning philosophy – the active participation of the learner in his or her own assessment should be welcomed. The concept of a portfolio with evidence of progress can be implemented electronically, on paper or a combination of both. This can include documentation of work completed, reports, reflections and assessments. As both a record and a measure of progress it can be used for continuous and final assessment. But be careful to distinguish between progress checks, which require constructive feedback, and mastery tests, where you are measuring the learner’s achievements against agreed targets.

As with any assignment, e-tutors must be clear about when assignments are scheduled, what is expected, standards of submissions, marking system and response times.
Planning

Having looked at the different types of e-tutor, there are some basic practical issues that have to be tackled, whatever role an e-tutor takes. Expectations for both learners and e-tutors must be clear and both sides must deliver to those standards. Online e-tutoring can fall apart if either party gets disappointed and de-motivated.

On a practical level, you need to define:

- How many learners each e-tutor will realistically support.
- Over what period the support will be required.
- How much time e-tutors will be able to spend with each learner.
- How many synchronous events, if any, will take place and when.
- The speed of response to be provided to learners by e-tutors.
- How payment for e-tutors will be calculated.
- If and how assessment will be handled.

A standard of performance must be agreed with the e-tutor before he or she is appointed. This must then be made explicit to the learners. The rules of engagement must also be clear - i.e. how communication is to be conducted, with clearly expressed expectations on both sides.

E-tutors must have the time available to do this job. If you have promised a standard of performance such as, a reply within 24 hours, or available between x and y time of day you must be sure that they will be available. A policy on holidays and sickness must also be agreed with adequate cover or a clear method of communications with the students about absences.

E-tutor profile

As an e-tutor you need to be respected by your learners. This will mean telling them who you are, what your background is and other relevant information; showing you as a rounded, experienced and trusted person who is eager to help them succeed.

Remember that you may have to send learners some written information to get them started, and even a formal letter. This should get to everyone, as some may access their email infrequently.

The phone may also be used if you feel that the learner needs some personal help.

Your profile may appear on a web page or be emailed to your learners – you may even have your own website. Whatever the method, let them get to know you as a person. This works both ways – learners must also present themselves as real people to their e-tutors

E-learner profiles

The e-tutor needs to get to know the e-learners, which means profiling them by their:

- Name, age, gender, etc.
- Education and career background
- Current level of knowledge about the subject
- Learning aspirations
- Constraints at home or work
- Level of computer literacy
- Fears

Other social and personal information may be useful if, as we shall see, the social side of the community is to be developed.

Rules of engagement

A learning contract is one way to manage the e-tutor/learner relationship. A standard of performance should be agreed with the e-tutor before he or she is appointed. This must then be made explicit to the learners. At the start of the e-tutoring process you may both agree to a ‘e-tutor/learner contract’ that establishes the rules of engagement.

This could include:

- Learner’s plan.
- Role of the e-tutor
- Means of communication
- Rules of communication; times, frequency, response times
- The course schedule with milestones
- When synchronous events will take place
- How progress will be assessed
Social dimension

A growing body of literature supports the view that the ‘social dimension’ is a necessary condition for success in e-tutoring. Social exchanges are extremely useful as ice-breakers at the start of discussions. However, as the dialogue progresses, the social dimension needs to be both managed and put to good use.

Social exchanges are, on the whole, positive. Dialogues on TV, cinema, sport, family, travel or whatever, bond participants. In the same way that learners interweave serious and social dialogue in the workplace or classroom, they do so online.

However, the goal in online discussions is learning and social dialogue may have to be pushed into specially set up ‘social’ forums, where it is made clear that pure social discussion can take place. One can certainly say that social exchange has to be controlled, or even stopped, if it starts to override the learning.

Alternatively, one can take the view that the social exchanges are fundamentally motivational and that they should be encouraged and included within the discussions. If certainly has direct benefits in that it encourages participation, establishes trust and promotes open and constructive discussion. Inexperienced e-tutors are often surprised by how personal learners become in this social space. The very fact that there is no face-to-face communication can encourage more intimacy.

Social contributions can be used constructively in learning as they sometimes expose worries, fears and opinions about the course, content and their own performance. E-tutors can gauge the learner’s current state and consider controlled intervention.

Just one word of warning: humour can be taken the wrong way and innocent social chat can be misunderstood. The old rule about ‘read again, then send’ applies.

Types of intervention:

Repair

If the learner or group has become confused and a real tangle ensues, one must attempt to unravel the mess. To repair the damage one might have to point out contradictions, confusions and misunderstandings. One might even have to take things back to a previous starting point.

Group dynamic theory shows that group discussions often drift towards compromise and consensus. In learning this can destroy and sense of exploration and challenge, leading to shallow reflection and conclusions.

Group discussions can also polarise, with combatants taking sides and dialogue turning into attack and defence. The e-tutor must value opinion on both sides but move the debate on constructively.

A single learner might also be dominating the group. In this case you might need to make contact with the student, summarise or acknowledge their contribution and ask others to comment.

In all cases repair is necessary, as damage can be done if the group senses confusion, blandness or conflict.

Reflect

A common intervention is to get the individual or group to stop and reflect. You can reinforce a positive point or use this technique to reflect and uncover a negative point. Either way, you are encouraging the learner to come to a conclusion themselves.

Focus

To bring focus to vague or confused situations one may have to sharpen things up by encouraging learners to summarise, paraphrase or shorten their explanations or reflections. They need to discard the irrelevant and make things more concise.

At some point you may have to delete messages, tidy up or remove irrelevant content. This has to be handled carefully as deletions may upset the contributors.

Short messages may also be used to bring focus. These are sometimes more likely to be read.

Expand

Expanding a point or topic may mean opening up the vista with further references, resources or alternative viewpoints. Stimulating their curiosity will often open up new avenues for the learner to explore. Refer to and acknowledge other people’s contributions and signpost ideas or make them clear to the learner.

Deepen

To encourage a learner or group to dig deeper conceptually, one may have to get more analytical in style, present ideas beyond those already covered. Encourage them to consider more than one perspective or push towards a more complex theory or analysis. Posing a problem may also encourage deeper thought.
Summarise

Sometimes, if an individual or group is flagging, you may want to push them along. Learners can dwell too long on detail and linger. They need to be pushed on to the next challenge. Seeding the discussion and presenting new activities and challenges can move things on.

At natural break points, or when discussions get a little too expansive, regular summarising may be necessary. It is important to involve the learners by acknowledging their contributions and summarising in as concise a manner as possible.

Accelerate

Whole group discussions can flag and may need to be driven forward by changing the nature of the tasks. There are several methods for restructuring discussions:

- Access to an expert.
- Project groups
- Small groups
- Paired learners

An expert can bring extra vitality to discussions, especially if learners are asked to submit questions in advance. You’d be surprised at how effective a little flattery can be when asking such experts to participate.

Specific projects for small groups of learners, preferably three or four, with specified timescales, can motivate learners. These could be real case studies, research or presentations back to the main group.

Pairs of learners, where communication can be by email, can give real mutual support. This can be useful for a learner who is nervous about participating in larger group discussions.
No one would think about jumping into a car and driving off without first having learned how to drive.

Apply the same common sense to online e-tutoring – it is important that e-tutors have mastered the online medium and the tools at their disposal. Good e-tutors are often experienced teachers or trainers but, as the discipline is relatively new, they have little experience in using online technology to apply their skills. This issue has to be tackled head-on. Those without the requisite technical skills have to be trained in their use. Neither is there room for the grudging technophobes who are using the technology because they’ve been told to. E-learning must be driven by enthusiastic, motivated and motivating people.

Do we want e-tutors to be experts in the use of online tools? This can mean a number of things. On one level, it means knowing technically how to use tools such as email, bulletin boards, chat and conferencing tools. On yet another level, it can mean providing support, even technical support, to online learners.

The e-tutor must be both competent and confident in the use of the specified online tools. If not, the e-tutor may lose both time and the respect of their learners. For example, the mechanics of using email must not become an obstacle to the management and support of learning – the tool needs to be used efficiently.

E-tutors must also be organised in the use of online tools. Even with simple tools, such as email, e-tutors must be able to organise learners’ details, their own email inbox, email address books, aliases and other features of their email and associated software tools.

These issues become more critical with more complex tools. To moderate a bulletin board requires both skills in using the software and editorial skills in filtering out unwanted material, closing down discussions that have run their course and initiating new topics.

E-tutoring and email

Much e-tutoring takes place via email and knowing how to use email through the management of your inbox and other email features is essential.

Email is a low bandwidth medium with the advantage that the receiver does not have to be there when you send the message. The receiver doesn’t even have to have their computer switched on when you send. The convenience of sending and receiving at any time puts you in charge.

Email is also pretty reliable and can be sent to or receiver from anyone in the world at a fraction of the cost of paper mail, a fax or telephone call. Another advantage that is often overlooked is that you can send the same email to many people simultaneously usually at no extra cost. It is this low cost feature that makes it so attractive. Email is not only convenient, it is remarkably cheap.

To deal with a range of learners, progressing at different rates with different needs is not easy. It is essential that e-tutors are skilled in using email efficiently and effectively.

Here are some guidelines:

- Get all learners’ email addresses in your electronic address book
- Set up an alias for all of the learners you are e-tutoring (i.e. a single email address that will automatically send an email to everyone in that group)
- Set up folders for the orderly storage of emails
- Test emails to individuals and aliases for groups
- Sort out any technical or communications problems
- Get to know the useful features of your email system

Responding to learners:

- Don’t reply in full to every question and query
- Refer learners to relevant sources (FAQs, websites, etc.)
- Refer learners to other learners for answers

...And why write the same email dozens of times? Have a set of well-crafted templates, one for each of the most common events and just add the personal touch to each. This saves a huge amount of time and makes your e-tutoring more consistent from the learner’s point-of-view.
e-tutoring and discussions

Actual discussions online are full of surprises, both good and bad.

The good news is that text-based communication is free from bias in terms of gender, race, age, accent and appearance. There is a guaranteed objectivity unless you give the game away. It can also be delightful to get positive feedback from students and feel a real sense of purpose in handling learners at a distance.

The bad news is that positive, purposeful and polite communication by text is not easy. You must be constantly aware of how the text could be misread by the learner. Words on a screen are stripped bare of their context; body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. You have to be more positive than usual in e-tutoring text to combat the possibility of being misread. Negative messages, no matter how accidental, will create an atmosphere of doubt in the learner. Mistrust will creep in along with the fear of making mistakes which will destroy the free flow of dialogue. If you do feel that something has gone wrong, tackle it immediately.

One must never be negative without reason, accusatory, curt, sarcastic (unless the social bond allows) or rude, especially about others. There are examples of online collaborative tools being removed, and legal action taken, when students made derogatory remarks about tutors in discussion groups.

Learners and tutors must be clear about the need to:

- Use short, meaningful titles in postings
- keep to one point or topic
- use a friendly tone
- NOT USE CAPS TO MAKE A POINT – IT’S RUDE!
- remember that readability matters on the screen – use headings, sub-headings, bullet points, and paragraphs
- be brief

E-TUTORING AND SYNCHRONOUS TOOLS

Facilitating a synchronous discussion or virtual classroom is even trickier. You must get agreement to set up the discussion so that everyone is online at the required time. The rules of engagement must also be clear in the minds of the participants. Then there’s the act of facilitation itself, where your role will be to encourage all participants to contribute, restrain domineering behaviour, keep the discussion on track and summarise the outcome of topics. If you are trying to do any of this without a detailed knowledge of how the software works, the exercise will quickly turn into an expensive waste of time.
WHAT MAKES A GOOD E-TUTOR?

E-tutors will ideally have some experience in teaching or training.

Online communication skills, which are significantly different from face-to-face communication skills, also help. Proficient use of technology such as email, discussion forums and keyboard skills are also useful.

These are the basics, but what really matters are your skills in dealing with learners. Really good e-tutors must be:

> Confident and sure of their own position
> Good motivators, able to build confidence
> Sympathetic and accessible to the learners
> Good sounding-boards
> Clear, honest and constructive communicators
> Positive, persistent and driven to make people succeed
> Proactive, keeping one step ahead of the learner
> Technically proficient with the specified online tools
> Patient and possessed of a sense of humour!

These are the basic required skills. However, a formal course and qualification in e-tutoring is a great leap forward, as these skills can be synthesised and practised, before unleashing yourself on real learners.

These are the views of some staff who had experienced e-tutoring in a large utilities company. They highlight some of the things that can go wrong in the relationship with an e-tutor:

> A difficulty in breaking the ice at the start of the process
> A lack of critical feedback
> Uncertainty about the level and frequency of communications between learner and e-tutor
> Feeling foolish in raising questions
> The ‘awe’ factor
> Discomfort in being compared with other learners

To overcome these problems requires sensitivity and strong interpersonal skills on behalf of the e-tutor. In long-term e-tutoring environments, many learners – as many as a third – simply do not take to online e-tutoring, another third use it primarily for buying time in the submission of assignments and the final third use it frequently and productively. There is also a small group who become fixated with the technology and use it obsessively, much to the annoyance of other learners.

As an e-tutor you will invariably find that your time will not be evenly spread among your learners. At one end of the spectrum you must encourage use and at the other control abuse.

Further reading

REFERENCES


E-tutor competencies

Institute of IT Training (IITT) competencies for e-tutors URL: http://www.iitt.org.uk/public/standards
Get in touch at: talktous@leolearning.com

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