

## **E-Tutoring: Overview**

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). Thus, at first glance, e-tutoring is only different to tutoring in terms of the involvement of technology. Herein, however, are contained vital differences in terms of time, distance and the specific technologies adopted, and these all have implications for teaching staff. 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.

This guidance note is aimed at teaching staff involved in designing and delivering online learning. There are unfortunately few "quick tips and tricks" for being an effective e-tutor. The purpose of this guide is to assist lecturers 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. Opportunities and support at Warwick for developing online learning and teaching are also outlined and further guidance resources provided.

### ***Strategies for teaching online***

There has been a considerable amount of interest and investment in the development of online learning (e-learning) by the higher education funding councils and individual universities, as well as by commercial organisations. In many cases, this is driven by the desire to exploit the potential of ICT in new global markets through distance education and to provide flexible and accessible learning. The use of technology as a cost-effective solution or one that will help deal with the increasing student numbers is perhaps also a factor in some cases.

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 or departmental 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 than traditional arrangements. A key feature of e-tutoring is to facilitate collaborative (or co-operative) learning and group working, activities for 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. (A number of staff are now making use of remote access for everyday 'admin' tasks, e.g. for accessing email (via web GroupWise) whilst away from the office, or for accessing files via local networks (personal space on the H: drive) otherwise held on the hard drive on an office or home PC.)

Getting to grips with the technology itself 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 tapping into established best practice in collaborative group work and tutor guidelines (see E-Tutoring Guidance materials in the Further resources section). Detailed guidelines, frameworks and models can be somewhat overwhelming if you just want to dip a toe in the water. As a starting point, the Effective Online Tutoring Guidelines (JISC/Sheffield College, see references) 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.

### **Considerations**

*You might consider the following questions in relation to your own teaching purposes and contexts, your subject culture, your student group(s), and your own workload.*

- ***What would it mean to you for your students to be "empowered" by online learning?***
- ***What are the emerging learning needs for experts in your discipline, how might these change the emphasis of existing course objectives and how might online learning support these?***
- ***What are your personal opportunities and concerns for e-learning and e-tutoring?***

### **Developing one's own skills and capabilities**

The core skills of a good tutor are unlikely to change with a different delivery method. The list below (expanded in the Effective Online Tutoring Guidelines, 2002) offers some of the broad skills for e-tutoring:

- 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.

It is absolutely not the case that a good face-to-face tutor will be a good online tutor, even if the necessary technical abilities are added. The tutor needs to make these core skills work equally well in an online environment. A list of e-tutor competencies is offered below (adapted from the IT Training standards, see references) to assist in identifying the major factors involved in effective e-tutoring. While an awareness of the full range of competencies is helpful, some aspects of support to online learners might be provided by central services (e.g. IT training, administrative and technical support). (Note: this list specifically excludes competencies relating to the overall design and development of an online learning programme, which are covered separately, FENTO 2000.)

### *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

Distinguishing a good online tutor from an excellent one may rely on an ability to deploy technologies effectively and imaginatively - a pedagogic skill rather than a technical skill. 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.

### **Considerations**

- **What stages of online learning will you be involved in?**  
*designing, developing, delivering, supporting, evaluating ...*
- **What role(s) do you adopt as a (e) tutor?**  
*expert, guide, facilitator, mentor, technical support ...*
- **What forms of support (e.g. central services) can you identify that would assist you?**
- **What skills can you build upon and what new skills might be required?**
- **How might these skills be acquired, developed or practiced?**
- **To what extent are these also skills that students might seek to develop and how might this influence curriculum approaches?**

### **Curriculum design issues**

Undoubtedly, the e-tutoring role will involve designing and supporting online learning activities. These might be aimed at promoting skills, scaffolding knowledge or facilitating collaboration (Beetham, 2002). It is important to be aware of the various pedagogical paradigms underpinning certain online course design approaches. For example, models that are instructivist, behaviourist, constructivist or communities of practice carry various assumptions about the "power" of the tutor and the student and thus the potential expectations of their different roles and contributions. For example, there are distinctions between classroom-based, teacher-led and online tutor-facilitated learning and particular uses of technologies can dictate the extent to which these paradigms are supported or abolished.

Four stages in delivering online learning are useful for planning activities:

**Design - Develop - Evaluate - Revise**

(Oliver, 2002).

Curriculum design could be the most important aspect in online learning and teaching. It is often ignored or considered well after development is underway. Similarly, once development is completed, many feel the work is finished and overlook the huge benefits of reviewing objectives and obtaining feedback through evaluation, identifying trouble areas, revising and improving format, activities and scheduling. The four stages should ideally be fairly equal. In practice, too little time is spent on curriculum design or review and too much time is committed to the development stage. Often evaluation and revision are left as developers move onto other projects.

Designing for the web is likely to be a new area for many lecturers. Core principles of curriculum design, including assignment/assessment design, need to be applied. Transferring existing paper-based handouts, worksheets, lecture notes, reading lists and making them available on the web will not enhance learning. (Although some students will be very pleased to access these from home, others will complain that now they have the printing costs!) Providing interactivity with the content, with other students, and with the tutor will maximise the benefits of using the Internet for teaching and learning. Using good instructional design practices will help to ensure that learners are engaged in the activities and assignments and have a clear purpose for using technology-based tools and materials. Good practice in graphical design (human-computer interfaces, HCI) should then be addressed with regard to the layout, look and feel, navigation, and so forth, of the web sites and pages themselves (see ITS user guide, details in Further resources section.)

There is no reason why offline activities should be segregated from online activities. For example, essays, fieldwork analysis and project plans can be presented and discussed online (perhaps even as work in progress) via word document attachments or through web forms. The commenting and review features of Word processing and web conferencing applications can be exploited so that students and tutors alike can exchange views and feedback or work collaboratively on a piece of work.

## ***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.

### **Support at Warwick**

The University of Warwick has a distinct e-Learning Strategy which relates to the wider e-Strategy and supports aspects of the broad Learning and Teaching Strategy. A number of opportunities are available to staff wishing to develop skills and capabilities in e-tutoring to support courses with an e-dimension.

The *Centre for Academic Practice* can assist in course review looking at the extent to which particular forms of educational technology might support or enhance curriculum needs. We offer guidance in effective techniques for teaching online, including the use of email, bulletin boards, web conferencing (text) and audio/video based conferencing. Contact Jay Dempster in CAP for further information and guidance.

The *elab group in IT Services* provides university-wide services that now include new e-learning tools, such as web publishing (SiteBuilder) and discussion facilities (Forums). Some development services are available at cost. Support and resources are offered for good web design in terms of usability, content structure and quality, copyright, page format, use of multiple media, accessibility and navigation. Contact John Dale in ITS for further information and guidance.

The *Library subject support* teams offer assistance in the use of electronic library materials to support online and offline courses. Contact Robin Green in the Library for further information and guidance.

The University provides a central Teaching Development Fund to support small pilot projects that explore new approaches, including those involving ICT. Contact Graham Lewis in CAP for further information and guidance.

The *CAP Educational Technology* web site provides extensive guidance and materials to support e-tutoring and the development and evaluation of e-learning curricula.

### **Considerations:**

- ***Would you benefit from discussing your ideas with a colleague or educational developer?***
- ***What costs are you likely to incur that a development fund could cover?***
- ***Is there anyone else in the University who is doing/has done something similar?***
- ***Can you tap into examples of existing practice?***
- ***What tools will you make use of and how familiar are you/your students with them?***
- ***Are there training materials or courses to get you up to speed? How can you have a play in your own time?***
- ***Over what time period would you like to develop an aspect of your course/teaching? Would you like to do this as part of an accredited programme?***

### **References**

Beetham, H. (2002) Skills and Competencies for E-Learning, in Staff development for e-learning, 17<sup>th</sup> April LTSN workshop. Materials available from LTSN: <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/>

IT Training standards Competencies for e-tutors: Framework for from the Institute of IT Training's Standards. <http://www.iitt.org.uk/public/standards/etutorcomp.asp>

Oliver, C.M. (2002) Curriculum design for elearning. LTSN/TechLearn publication.

TechLearn (2000) Online Tutoring Briefing Paper. Available at <http://www.techlearn.org.uk/cgi-bin/techspec.pl?l=7>

## ***Further resources***

### **Books**

- David McConnell (2000) Implementing Computer Supported Cooperative Learning (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Kogan Page.
- Gilly Salmon (2000) E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online. Kogan Page.
- David Murphy, Rob Walker and Graham Webb (2001) Online Learning and Teaching with Technology: Case studies, experience and practice. Kogan Page.
- Terry Evans and Daryl Nation (2000) Changing University Teaching: Reflections on Creating Educational Technologies. Open and Distance Learning Series, Kogan Page.
- Martin Weller (2002) Delivering Learning on the Net: the why, what & how of online education. Kogan Page.

### **Advisory services**

- Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) 24 subject centres and generic centre <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/>
- Online technologies *TechLearn* <http://www.techlearn.ac.uk/>
- Online accessibility *TechDis* <http://www.techdis.ac.uk>
- Online assessment *CAA Centre* <http://www.caacentre.ac.uk>

### **Guidance materials**

- Effective Online Tutoring Guidelines JISC. The Sheffield College: <http://www.techlearn.org.uk/NewDocs/>

- Online Tutoring Briefing Paper TechLearn: <http://www.techlearn.ac.uk/Themes/E-Tutoring.htm>
- Effective tutoring using CMC (Bristol) Summary of the Salmon five stages of participation in online discussion: [http://www.ltss.bris.ac.uk/cmc\\_6.htm](http://www.ltss.bris.ac.uk/cmc_6.htm)
- Learning to Teach On Line (LeTTOL): <http://www.sheffcol.ac.uk/lettol/>
- Tutor guidelines, staff development guidelines, and a resource pool for supporting online learning. OTIS resources: <http://otis.scotcit.ac.uk/casestudy/juwah.doc>
- Developing skills tutorials for CMC, VLEs, online assessment and videoconferencing. ELICIT online tutorials: <http://www.elicit.scotcit.ac.uk/>
- Remote teaching guidelines for class-based students and groups. ANNIE resources: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ETS/ANNIE/>
- QAA distance learning guidelines <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public.dlg/contents.htm>
- [Developing E-moderating in Higher and Further Education](#): Dr Gilly Salmon, The Open University Business School.
- [JISC Effective Online Tutoring Guidelines](#): Julia Duggleby, Joanna Howard, Kate Butler, Les Williams, Martin Cooke, Carol Cotton, Seb Schmoller, The Sheffield College.
- [Online tutoring, the OTIS experience: A JISC guide for online tutors](#). Carol A Higginson and Rachel A Harris.
- LTSN Guides to Online Discussions <http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/FAQ/cmclit.php>
- Online Community Toolkit - tips, tools and ideas: <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitymanual.htm>
- Copyright and content: Tips for online tutors: <http://human.ntu.ac.uk/elc/ch4/ch4.htm>

### **Competencies and training**

- Promoting E-tutoring through best practice for staff development <http://www.shef.ac.uk/nlc2002/proceedings/papers/15.htm>
- Institute of IT Training courses aimed at developing online tutoring and course design skills based on its published 'Framework of Competencies for Online Tutors' <http://www.iitt.org.uk>

- E-Tutoring workshop materials, Robin Mason, Helen Beetham:  
<http://www.techlearn.ac.uk/Themes/E-Tutoring%20Work%20shop%20Materials.htm>
- E-tutoring: an analysis of roles and competencies, Steeples, Goodyear, Tickner  
<http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/jisc/SAMOS2000.ppt>
- Competencies for e-tutors Institute of IT Training Standards  
<http://www.iitt.org.uk/public/standards/etutorcomp.asp> Staff development for e-tutors.

### **Student needs and experiences**

- Networked learning in higher education Analysis of student experiences  
<http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/jisc/>
- E-Tutoring Visually Impaired Students  
<http://www.cetis.ac.uk/groups/20020410132743/20020821135600>
- VLS Case study in *Developing effective Online Tutoring*  
<http://itlearningspace-cot.ac.uk/courses/otis/module42/casestudy.cfm?modulesid=66>