

Working Together: Perceptions of the Role of the Tutor in a Postgraduate Online Learning Programme

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Abstract

This paper reports the latest phase of an ongoing programme of research, exploring online learning in a part-time postgraduate programme in Clinical Education at Edge Hill University, which is delivered by means of Supported Online Learning.

The aim of this current research is to obtain insights into the perceptions and experiences of tutors and students regarding the role of the tutor within the context of the online learning environment, and to identify the influence of the tutor on the development of true dialogue in online discussion.

Preliminary analysis of interviews with tutors and students from a single cohort of the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Clinical Practice (PGCTLCP) are presented, along with an initial analysis of the actual postings from the discussion board of that same course.

Initial findings from this study indicate that the concept of tutor 'presence' is widely acknowledged as important, both by students and by tutors. However, early indications suggest that different individuals perceive both the nature and practice of 'facilitation' differently; and also that different individuals perceive different levels of intervention as desirable. The challenge, therefore, is how the tutor should intervene in order to achieve optimum engagement by all participants.

Keywords

Online learning, e-learning, online discussion, CMC, online teaching.

Introduction

This paper reports the latest phase of an ongoing programme of research, exploring online learning in a part-time postgraduate programme in Clinical Education at Edge Hill University. The programme is delivered by means of Supported Online Learning (also known as 'blended-learning'). This current phase of research aims to obtain insights into the perceptions and experiences of tutors and students regarding the role of the tutor within the context of the online learning environment, and to identify the influence of the tutor on the development of dialogue in the online discussion board.

Supported Online Learning

The focus of the current study is the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Clinical Practice (PGCTLCP), which is the result of a unique collaboration between Edge Hill University, the University of Chester, and the Mersey Deanery. Using a virtual learning environment (VLE), the one-year programme uses just five face-to-face contact sessions, with the remainder of the teaching and learning taking place online. The course has been running successfully since 2000, and its development is described in detail elsewhere (Sackville, 2002).

The social constructivist model embraced by the Course Team place emphasis on encouraging interactivity within the programme, although it is recognised that there can be different dimensions of interactivity, which have been explored at an earlier Networked Learning Conference (Sackville, 2002).

Previous work by the Course Team has focused primarily on interactions between students, and on the development of dialogue (Sackville & Sherratt, 2006; Sherratt & Sackville, 2006a, 2006b). The current study extends this enquiry to consider the role and influence of the tutor in the online learning context.

Research Methods

This study seeks to problematise the different dimensions of 'online discussion', to explore students' and tutors' experiences within an online programme, and to consider the role that both design and tutor intervention can have in shaping discussion.

To achieve this aim, a multiple-source approach to data-collection has been adopted, exploring individual perceptions and experiences, working in a predominantly qualitative mode of enquiry, and then combining that data with a more quantitative exploration of online archives and classification of activity within the online discussion board of the chosen online course.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from a single cohort from the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Clinical Practice (PGCTLCP), to establish their perceptions and expectations of tutors online, and their actual experiences of interaction with the tutors and with other students. Participation was entirely voluntary, resulting in data being obtained from 23 of the total 32 students. For most of the students, this was also their initial experience of online learning, such that their expectations were not influenced by previous experience or involvement in different courses elsewhere. To give an added dimension, data were also gathered from all five tutors who were involved in delivering this programme to the specified cohort of students.

Objective observations and analyses were also carried out on the archives of online discussion for the chosen cohort. In particular, the type of online interaction was explored. The Typology of Online Responses is described in detail elsewhere (Sackville & Sherratt, 2006). This typology aims, by means of a simple 4-point scale, to identify where 'dialogue' actually takes place online, as opposed to a series of unconnected statements or monologues, which can often be seen to occur in online discussion boards everywhere, but which are deemed by the PGCTLCP Course Team to be less satisfactory as learning experiences. The application of this typology to the PGCTLCP online discussion board charted the development of discussions, and thus allowed the potential impact of tutors on the development (or hindrance) of dialogue to be explored.

In addition, the tutors' styles of facilitation and intervention were also identified using another simple taxonomy (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003), which identifies postings *without* academic content as well as those *with* academic content, to give a more complete view of each tutor's overall 'presence'. This taxonomy was applied here at a thematic level, as recommended by Blignaut and Trollip (2003), thus allowing each individual message to qualify under several, or indeed, all six headings.

The study sample

The cohort was divided into four Learning Sets, and each was balanced so that they contained equal numbers of males and females, and the spread of different professions was also the same in each group. Groups were also balanced to ensure that the more experienced participants were shared out equally, and each group also contained participants whose initial experience of Higher Education had been outside of the UK. By structuring the Learning Sets in this way, participants in each group can be seen to gain an equitable learning experience. The course consisted of three modules, and each Learning Set was assigned a tutor for each module, moving to a different tutor for subsequent modules.

Findings & Discussion

The mechanisms involved in achieving a full and rich dialogue in an online discussion board appear to be complex, and as yet not fully understood, although some scope has already been identified for the potential of tutors to influence this process, (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Sherratt & Sackville, 2006a, 2006b). Indeed, Swan (2002: p32) commented that *"instructors' activity is an important factor in the success of online learning"*.

However, in earlier work (Sackville & Sherratt, 2006; Sherratt & Sackville, 2006a, 2006b), an application of Swan's (2002) community indicators (affective, cohesive, and interactive) suggests that online discussion boards benefit from not being overly tutor-focused. This work has also identified that individual participants taking on a facilitative role can also be significant, and this creates a different dynamic than facilitative intervention by a tutor. We have termed these individuals 'peer facilitators'.

Students' Perceptions

Initial findings in this study indicate that the concept of tutor 'presence' is acknowledged to be of great importance, both by students and by tutors. However, early indications suggest that different individuals perceive both the nature and practice of 'facilitation' differently. It is also suggested that different individuals perceive different levels of intervention as desirable.

It is also apparent that many participants had not consciously considered their expectations of tutors, and that some were torn between recognising what was best for them as independent adult learners, and yet still yearning for the reassurance and simplicity of a more prescriptive experience, sometimes leading to contradictions in the beliefs and values they expressed. For some individuals, these contradictions may also reflect the changes they went through, for example, growing in confidence and thus changing their own online behaviour during the course of their year's study.

Participants' expressed need for tutor intervention in the online discussion-board can be characterised into four main groupings, two actively seeking tutor support, and two not seeking such active involvement on the part of the tutor. These groups are represented as the four quadrants of the graph in Figure 1.

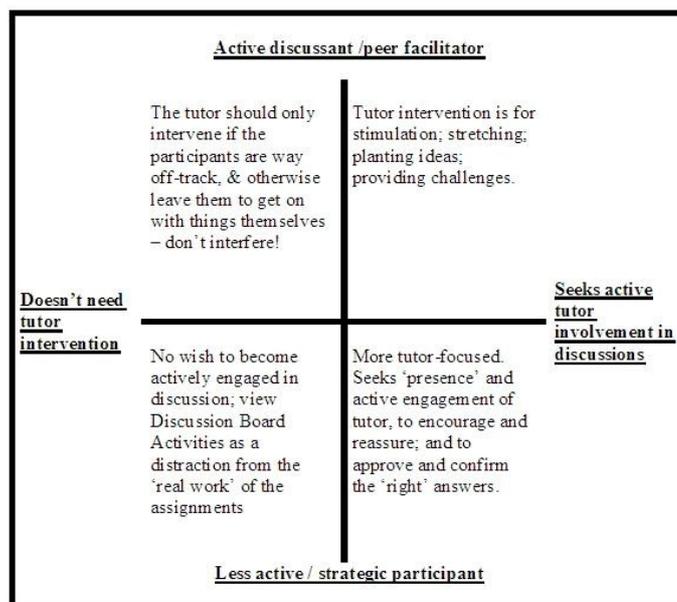


Figure 1: Students' need for tutor intervention

Some students were clearly and unequivocally of the opinion that frequent tutor intervention is desirable, looking for challenge and stimulation:

“we did have three very different approaches [from tutors], and when I compare two of them, I think the one where the tutor had a little bit more input, the group responded very well, and the discussions that ensued seemed to be much richer and much more thoughtful, and more people were inputting to them” (Participant 15)

“It was a whole new subject to me and I did need some guidance about where to go with it all, so it was definitely better to have some contribution the comments that were put on by the tutor were more of a question. They tended to ask you to go further, explore the idea, so I suppose they helped the discussion along really.” (P16)

"We had 3 different tutors, and the last one was [Tutor] and she did sort of 'plant' things from time to time" (P18)

"[Tutor] drew things out of me, because [Tutor] would say yes, you've said that now, but what do you mean by this? so it was encouraging me to post more than just the one posting that I had to do it was as if [Tutor] was trying to stretch us in that module, by asking us questions" (P13)

These students tended to be fairly active discussants, and their seeking of tutor intervention was to further extend the online discourse achieved. These students seem to embrace the idea of all working together, perhaps indicating an expectation of more of a peer or mentoring relationship. They can be characterised to the top right-hand quadrant of Figure 1.

Other students also sought frequent tutor intervention, but for these students, tutor intervention seems more focused around providing reassurance to the students and also imparting knowledge born out of experience. It can be suggested, perhaps, that some of these students may lack self-confidence, leading them to be more tutor-focused, looking to the tutor to approve and confirm the 'right' answers. These students can be characterised to the lower right-hand quadrant of Figure 1.

"tutors should not dominate and tell the learners what to think; or focus always on the tutor's own views, but they should definitely be there as an omnipresent and omniscient being (in the discussion board at least!)" (P4)

"Maybe guidance is the word really, for the simple reason that the tutor knows what's in the course, and what will benefit and what will waste the students' time; whereas the people who are taking part in the discussion – its just like me" (P9)

"It's like leading a horse to water - OK you can't make it drink, and adult learners do have to take responsibility for themselves, but the tutors' role should be to get you to the water." (P4)

Other students, however, report that they regarded tutor intervention as "interference" and expected tutors to be much more 'hands-off', such that the function of the tutor is more of a monitoring role. This group can perhaps be characterised as active discussants, confident, articulate, and comfortable with the self-directedness of postgraduate learning; and they can be located in the upper left-hand quadrant of Figure 1. For them, the online Discussion Board was largely for students, as peers, to support each other:

"The purpose of the online discussion activities is peer support. It's about your own learning and supporting others to learn." (P13)

"my personal feeling is that it's a 'light hand on the tiller', it's just to keep things moving along - and to encourage the group itself to try and work collaboratively, in a group way, almost like a PBL [problem-based learning] group, so the tutor sits there and has that role, so you make sure that the process is occurring" (P10)

"I didn't feel like I was writing for the teachers, I felt I was writing for the Group. I expected the rest of the Group would read what I had written, but I didn't particularly expect that the teachers would read every posting, and it wouldn't have mattered whether they did or not, because the intention was that you were writing for your peers, not for the teacher". (P1)

"The tutor can 'oversee' that students are on the right lines without 'spoonfeeding' students" (P32)

Interestingly, this is in direct contradiction of the work of Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005), who propose that online interaction must go hand-in-hand with active 'leadership' if deep learning is to occur. However, many of the students in this cohort achieved excellent grades, suggesting that they had indeed

achieved deep learning and critical thinking - in some cases, without extensive tutor intervention.

The final group of students were those who were not significantly engaged in the online discussions, and whose contributions seem to be motivated more by the fixed requirements of the course. They are located in the lower left-hand quadrant of Figure 1 (above). For these students, only the formally assessed aspects of the course had importance, and so tutor intervention within the online discussion board was not necessary, since the Discussion Activities were a distraction from the "real work" of the assignments. The significance of the tutor for these individuals was accessibility for advice and guidance, although possibly in an individual dialogue, such as by email. Thus, some indication that the tutor is actually *there* is still important, but not in the discussion-board context.

"The main thing was getting feedback from the draft assignments. wherever I could, apart from the actual draft assignments, I tend to just try to go it alone. But right from the beginning on the first day, I said I don't like group-work." (P11)

"I found the feedback came back swiftly, was very useful, when you're doing sort of formative work" (P28)

"I think the big thing for me was Personal Tutor contact time, around the assignments" (P17)

The challenge that now arises is how tutors can predict which groups will fall into which sector of the diagram shown in Figure 1 (above), so that their practice as online tutor can best support each student's learning needs. This may also have implications for course design, since the participants from the lower left-hand quadrant of Figure 1 do not seem to gain significant benefits from online discussion activities as currently framed. Then again, it may be that these students *do* benefit, and simply do not recognise it? Thus, it appears that further work is warranted in this area, in order to gain a fuller understanding.

In addition to considering students' expectations of tutors, the interviews explored the students' reactions to their learning experience in each module. Mazzolini and Maddison (2003) noted that students considered tutors who posted frequently to be more enthusiastic, a finding which is also borne out here.

"not only did [Tutor] interact more with me, [Tutor] interacted more with everybody, and – it was as if [Tutor] was taking – and I know this is not the case, but it was as if [Tutor] was taking a greater interest – it just appeared that way. I know it probably isn't that [Tutor] was more interested than the other two people, but it just appeared that way, because the interaction was greater." (P13)

Meanwhile, the reverse also seems to hold true, and it is particularly interesting that some participants were of the opinion that some tutors did not read all the discussion-board postings, simply because those tutors did not post frequent messages themselves.

"I don't think that tutor would have read our postings, that's not the feeling that I got - but maybe they did, and they just didn't respond?" (P15)

Tutors' Perceptions

Initial findings as regards tutors' perceptions mirror, to a certain extent, the insights gained from the students - *ie*, that the concept of tutor 'presence' is acknowledged by all tutors to be very important, but that there are clearly identifiable differences in how individual tutors perceive both the nature and practice of 'facilitation'. This, in turn, leads individual tutors to adopt different styles of intervention in practice.

All tutors were careful not to dominate the discussion, leading them to take very much a monitoring role, rather than making frequent active postings. This seems to be a shared ethos across the team.

"normally I've also watched and thought well I don't want to be 'muscling in' on the discussion" (Tutor 2)

"Well, I see the tutors' role there to be much akin to the role in the PBL setting, where you're there maybe as a facilitator of learning, not to actually teach, but to facilitate progression" (T4)

"I flick through and scroll down and look what people are saying, and if its all going wonderfully well, maybe do nothing" (T3)

However, some tutors also felt that the 'best' discussions were ones which generated vibrant discourse without tutor intervention, and this clearly had implications for their individual practice as online tutors:

"I would prefer to have it from the student participant, than for me to say 'well, have you thought about' or 'I don't agree with this' – I'd rather they did it." (T4)

"that's where you get into this problem of how far it's their discussion board and how far it's the tutor's discussion board" (T1)

Whereas other tutors identified another, more active element in their tutoring, aiming to develop and 'stretch' the learners. This is very much more in keeping with the view expressed by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005), and in stark contrast to those tutors who favour the 'ghost in the wings' approach:

"I always finish off any posting I make by inviting comment, or asking a question - never just making it a 'closed' statement; and if I've replied to one person, then I always ask the rest of the group whether or not they agree" (T5)

"I think its about aiding the students' understanding, but doing that through prodding, through suggesting, by summarising, if that's appropriate, the different threads, or just saying well done! ... And its trying to bring that added dimension – to taking them that one stage further, from what they've read to perhaps how they can apply it, or taking some of our students from a very narrow focus in their particular area to try to get them to look at a broader canvas" (T3)

This also seems to be the area where students experienced the most differences, and is another area which would warrant further investigation in future work. It is also particularly interesting to compare students' own perceptions of how active or inactive the group was when facilitated by each tutor with an analysis of the groups' interactions, using a basic interaction typology (Sackville & Sherratt 2006), see Figure 3.

Interestingly, Kamin and colleagues (2006) have proposed that levels and styles of tutor intervention change over time, depending in part on the tutor's familiarity with the students; and there is also some evidence for this change in the current study, for example:

"as you go on, you form a relationship and you are able to move into a more facilitative relationship" (T3)

"I also feel that overt 'tutor presence', as an aspect of the overall 'climate of trust', seems to be quite important when they are just getting started" (T5)

Types of Intervention

Anderson and colleagues (2001) refer to the general concept of 'teaching presence' to describe active tutor facilitation, comparing this to the 'cognitive, affective and managerial roles' identified by Coppola and colleagues (2001). However, it should be noted that 'teaching presence' is only one of three aspects of their total 'Community of Inquiry' framework (Garrison et al, 2000), alongside 'cognitive presence' and 'social presence', and as such, one might postulate that some aspects of the tutor's higher-level pedagogic function could, perhaps, be captured more accurately under the category of 'cognitive presence'. Indeed, Garrison and Cleveland-Innes have commented (2005: p137) *"we find the leadership role of the instructor to be powerful in triggering discussion and facilitating high levels of thinking and knowledge construction"*. They suggest that simply achieving dialogue online is not sufficient to achieve the best learning experience, and they therefore focus more on critical thinking and cognitive presence.

Blignaut and Trollip (2003) propose an amended taxonomy, based on that of Anderson and colleagues (2001). This now offers three elements of activity *'without academic content'*: Administrative, Affective, and Other (including presenting discussion topics); and three elements of activity *'with academic content'*: Informative, Socratic, and Corrective. Although some readers may find the allocation of topics for discussion to the 'Other' category slightly unsatisfactory, nevertheless, this taxonomy offers a simple yet comprehensive way of presenting the actions of a tutor, and clear differences in individual teaching styles can be observed. For this course, it is most noticeable in the 'Socratic' element (Figure 2).

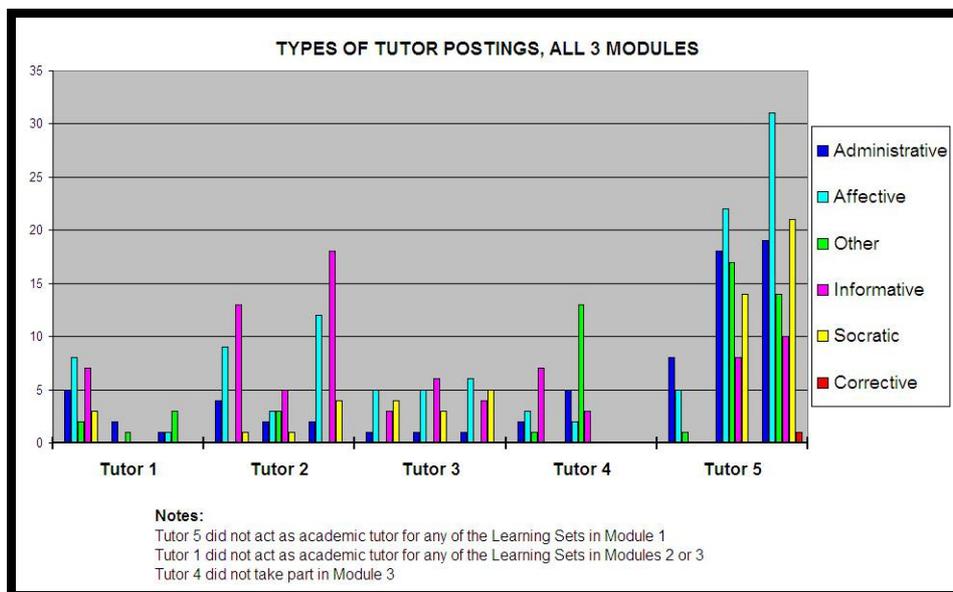


Figure 2: Type of tutor postings, using the Blignaut & Trollip (2003) taxonomy

However, despite students' perceptions of a major difference in their experience, in fact only minor differences in the levels of interaction can be observed from module to module, since some element of dialogue was still achieved by 'active' groups in all modules (see Figure 3), and the overall profile of each group varied only slightly from module to module. However, this is interesting in itself, since it bears out Shea's (2006: p41) proposition that *"perceived teaching presence is associated with students' sense of learning community"*.

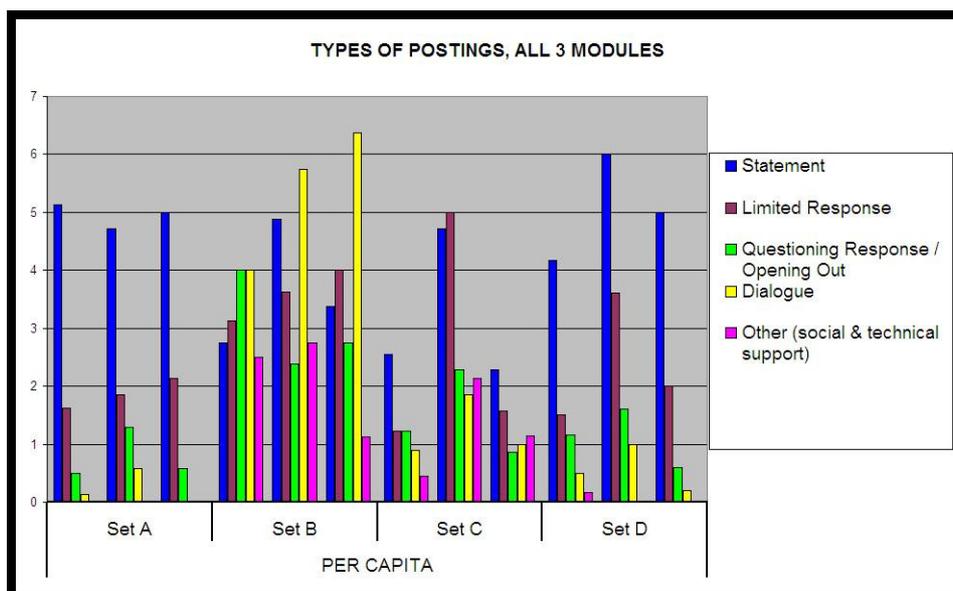


Figure 3: Type of student interaction, using the Sackville & Sherratt (2006) typology

The question that now arises is whether it was an issue not simply of the existence or absence of dialogue, but rather regarding the quality and depth of the discourse achieved, and it is therefore proposed, as future work, that content analysis to identify critical thinking could shed any light on the differences in the students' perceived experience.

Conclusion

This paper presents preliminary analysis and initial findings of the study, and clearly, further work and a more detailed and in-depth analysis is required to explore the implications of the study more fully. However, it appears that the emerging issue for tutors is to maintain 'visibility' and to keep the trust of their students, but without dominating or stifling the discussion, and without encouraging dependence in the students, since earlier work (Sherratt & Sackville, 2006a, 2006b) has indicated that tutor-focused groups do not achieve such good dialogue or rich discourse when compared to more independent groups.

The concept of tutor 'presence' is acknowledged to be important, both by students and by tutors. However, this study also suggests that different individuals perceive 'facilitation' differently, and that they also have very different views on the actual role of the online tutor. Furthermore, it is also evident that different individuals perceive different levels and types of intervention as desirable, and this has implications not only for the practice of individual online tutors, but also for course design. It also suggests that a further challenge is not simply how often, but also in what way the tutor should intervene in order to achieve optimum engagement and deepest learning by all students, and further work appears warranted.

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