

## Unit 4 The role of the tutor

Initially, the role of a tutor using online technology in teaching is hardly different than the role of the traditional tutor who in the first instance is preparing for good teaching. But using *online* technology in teaching is not necessarily a straightforward task and does place added responsibility on the tutor, who will need time to acquire new technical and pedagogic skills and become aware of new approaches to teaching that support online learning better. Preparedness for online or blended teaching involves a wide range of activities that can seem daunting, and the following sections are an effort to not only assist in the planning of being as best prepared as possible but also to ensure consistent quality in the use of online technologies overall.

### 1.0 Why bother?

As a traditional tutor, you may be asking yourself ‘Why should I go to the trouble of incorporating technology into my lecture in the first place?’ or ‘How can my teaching style be carried over to the online classroom?’ These are valid questions, but consider the following before saying no to technology:

- Do you find you don’t have the time for problem-based learning?
- Is it always the same handful of students who answer your questions?
- Do your students lack opportunity to practice skills with feedback?
- Is collaborative work among students too difficult for them to manage due to vocational and family commitments?
- Are your students asking you the same questions again and again, or finding it increasingly difficult to consult you during office hours only?

If you answered yes to any one of the above questions, online technology may be an opportunity for you to enhance your teaching and support your students better in one of the following ways:

- Online resources, such as images, video clips, flash animations and interactivities are freely available on the web (subject to permissions) which you can hyperlink to on a webpage as a meaningful supplement to your delivered lecture material.
- All students have a voice online and often engage in an online discussion better than in public. Making one available to a current topic extends lecture time and promotes deep thought.
- Groups can meet online at their leisure given the online communication tools to do so
- An online Problems Forum will see students helping each other rather than relying solely on you.

- Automatic feedback and computerised scoring on online exams gives students the opportunity to monitor progress on their own throughout the term
- The online assignment dropbox makes it convenient for you and your students to process assignments.

These are just a few examples of how online technology can be used to assist you in your teaching.

## 2.0 Teacher, moderator, facilitator, coach.....?

Current literature around teaching with online technologies is certainly not consistent in the role ascribed to the person carrying out that role. The fully online tutor in particular may be assigned anything from being designer and learning technologist over to moderator, trainer, coach and finally, co-learner. The truth for individual tutors seems to lie somewhere in between all of these identities, rather than being pressed into one label for all and it may take some time to find out exactly what your role evolves into.

The truth is also, however, that once you decide to implement technology into your teaching, your role as a tutor will change. As demonstrated in Unit 3 already there are things to be aware of and to put in place that were not the case in your traditional teaching (ah, bliss!), ranging from access issues to appropriate training and induction of the teaching team and students. No, technology is not the focus, but there is work involved in preventing it from becoming a barrier. Luckily at Edinburgh Napier we have a network of support in place to assist you on what should become a worthwhile and rewarding endeavour rather than an unavoidable chore. You are encouraged to seek out the wide range of institutional help in place as highlighted in section 6.5 if you haven't done so already. The focus of the remaining unit will be on *you* and what your students may be looking to you for once the teaching term is underway.

► See [Unit 1 section 6.5](#) for detailed list of available support.

## 3.0 Things to do

In Unit 3 of this guide the focus was on module design and development issues for modules enhanced by the use of technology in blended or online delivery. Our focus here is on the work that begins once the students start populating your classes. Designing a technologically enhanced module with the learner in mind is only half the battle and part of a persistent misconception that “once it's up online, the tutor has much more time”. Little could be further from the truth as all students –traditional, blended or online-need their tutors. The difference lies in the nature and location of that support and in the range of tasks that you will find yourself doing. Let's begin with the start of the term.

### 3.1 The term begins

Inadequate online support is closely linked to poor student attrition rates, but as demonstrated previously support of the student begins long before online or blended learning module delivery in order to assure seamless module access on day one of the term or to provide opportunities for practice and familiarisation. At no other time is the student more vulnerable than in the very first week, ie, at his/her very first login to the online learning environment. Studies in the UK, Australia, Canada and the US all confirm this. Here administrative and technical support play key roles as well. Judith Hughes of Athabasca University, Canada writes recently, 'Institutions engaged in distance and online education know that smooth administrative processes can be as much a factor in learner success as the design of learning resources.'(Hughes, 2004)

Subsequently, aside from creating material upfront for a 12 or 16-week course, administrative processes will have to be completed, such as book orders and matriculation. Once this is in place and you have double checked the timeline dates, embedded hyperlinks and contact details-let the term begin!

### 3.2 The term is underway

Students are often anxious about the online learning environment, but your consistent online presence from the start will encourage students to log in as well. Needless to say this will require timetabling on your part and there may be workload issues to address in relation to your new role.

Beginning the term with a warm welcome message on the module homepage invites the student to probe further. Ensuring timely and supportive responses to e-mails and conference discussion posts acknowledges the students' effort and time spent online.

Here are some further general online student support tips that you may find helpful:

- Be there!
- Maintain an encouraging, friendly online voice.
- Share technical difficulties and e-mail students in case of technical problems-let them know you are aware and care.
- Remember you can never give students enough guidance or instructions online. Post reminders of due dates on the Noticeboard or Announcements area, for example
- Request feedback and use it to improve delivery during the term
- Respond promptly to all enquiries
- Set and communicate strict e-mail parameters (tutor time management)
- Set and enforce assignment deadlines (student study-skills support).

## 4.0 Supporting the learner community

In addition to establishing your online presence, designing an online module in such a way that is supportive of a community of online learners is also paramount to dispelling online learning anxieties and subsequently fostering online engagement. This sees a range of communication technologies in use in order to enable peer-peer and peer-tutor support and discourse. By considering the social dimension of online interaction and creating opportunities for gaining trust for effective and rich online communication and collaboration once the term is underway-you will help your students not only feel comfortable but they may even reach better learning outcomes. Read on for a few ideas on how this can be accomplished.

### 4.1 Tutor online presence

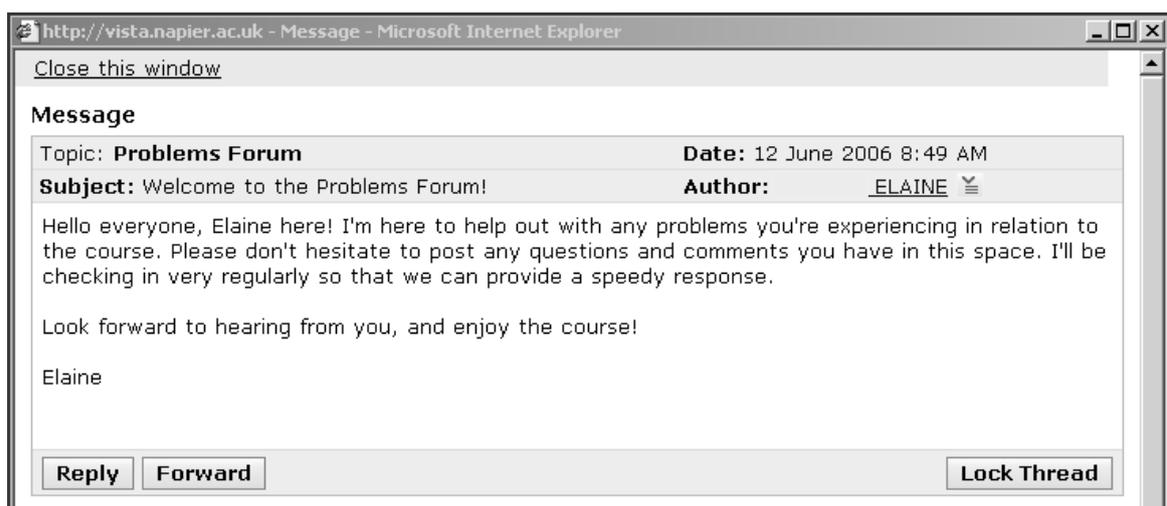
The tutor initially lays the foundation for an online learning community by careful design of and preparation of the learning environment (see [Unit 3](#)). As mentioned before the first login to the module homepage leaves a lasting impression and can raise a mixture of emotions with the student. A thoughtful choice of icons, fonts, colour combinations and straightforward design can avoid initial disorientation. Let's look into the finer details in the next sections.

#### 4.1.1 Welcome

A warm and inviting welcome message helps make the student feel more at ease and already sets the personal tone for online delivery by the tutor. This is best followed up in a tutor introduction (including photo) and subsequent 'Introduction' conference and other bonding activities in the first week of class in which students can then introduce themselves and become familiar with the online learning environment. By acknowledging each introduction with a short but cordial greeting (*'Hello Sheila, welcome on board!'*), the tutor establishes visibility to each student who feels reassured of tutor support and guidance within the online learner community.

#### 4.1.2 Additional communication spaces

Helping students *help each other* can be achieved by creating a 'Problems Forum' discussion for posting questions technological or academic in nature. Consider making it clear that e-mail communication is reserved for questions of private nature only (see [Appendix 11](#)).



**Figure 6: Example of an opening text in the Problems Forum of a WebCT module**

Finally, creating an informal discussion or chat for students, gives them the opportunity to let off steam and get to know one another better 'outside' of the classroom. Establish the informal atmosphere by labelling it 'Teatime' or 'Coffee, anyone?' and watch students share jokes, compare hairdressers, and point out a really bad book.

In an e-mail, gently persuade non-participants early in the term to login, reminding them of the learning opportunities missed. Offer help, always maintaining an encouraging voice.

► See [Unit 5](#) for an overview of the asynchronous and synchronous communication tools.

## 4.2 Online discussion moderation

In addition to the more informal discussion areas described above the asynchronous conference is central to collaborative learning and knowledge construction. Making a formal discussion area available can extend classroom time to allow for more reflection on a topic addressed in class. Integrated into the fully online lesson students have read and then reflect, share and respond to one another facilitated by the mindful tutor.

### 4.2.1 Managerial tips

- In order to ensure the expected quality of discussion it is recommended that the maximum class size not exceed 20 for language skills modules and 30 for all others per tutor. The online tutor will require support for larger class sizes, best split up into discussion cohorts each led by the tutor or an assistant.
- Choose the question for discussion carefully. Open-ended, provocative questions, addressing themes relevant to students' lives are a good starting point.

- Support time management skills by imposing open/closed window time frames for discussion posts (ie 7-14 days). Make this clear in the module timeline/handbook/guide. Repeat dates within the assignment itself.
- Avoid discussion overload - one discussion topic/week or 14 days is usually sufficient for all.
- Always begin the discussion thread - nothing more off-putting than an empty discussion board!
- Limit the word count of responses (200–350)
- Add student name in the subject heading (*'Re.: Leadership/Response to Paul'*) to improve navigation of discussion threads.

#### 4.2.2 Pedagogical tips

Furthermore it is important to keep in mind that the tutor naturally leads by example, and very soon the style and tone of student responses will reflect what is put forth by the tutor.

- Always reread responses before submitting, checking for spelling errors, correct student name etc.
- Make it worth the students' while by incorporating online discussion participation into the grading scale
- Create an online participation assessment rubric for quick feedback to student
- Always address students by their preferred name (established in introduction conference) to show interest in the student as an individual.
- Acknowledge the student's response by referring to it (*'Thank you, Kevin, for this helpful definition...'* or *'Rory, in your post you refer to...'*)
- Responding immediately in a private e-mail to any offensive/problematic online communication whatsoever. See section 5.0 below for further advice on this issue.

► See [Unit 6 section 5.4](#) for further guidance on online discussion grading.

#### 4.2.3 Supporting rich online discussion

Research shows that while the majority of all students feels uncomfortable speaking in public (in front of the class or in a seminar), most students feel less inhibited communicating their views online, in an asynchronous discussion environment. Here, the tutor is challenged to acknowledge, encourage, redirect, prompt and guide trains of thought-without dominating and while maintaining a friendly and supportive tone throughout.

The tutor is not only the content expert but the catalyst for online interaction.

Tips for supporting bustling online discussion activity include:

- Be there without barging in! The tutor is the pro-active moderator who: acknowledges, redirects/corrects, affirms, guides, encourages, and summarises.

But, this takes some practice to do. Therefore, for the first day or so, taking a back seat and watching carefully, taking notes is good advice, before joining with an opening like, 'Thank you to all discussion participants so far! I can tell you have done your research. Let's take a closer look at Andrew's response, however, in which he...'

- Try not to write like a textbook. Maintaining a professional voice does not require sounding like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and will make the student feel more at ease with written language skills. Students like your stories, anecdotes and links to current events.
- Be personal but avoid emoticons and be cautious of using humour in formal online discussion environment.
- Acknowledge discussion participant's presence by directly referring to a contribution in the response. (*Maurice, it is evident that you have carefully weighed both sides...*).
- Encourage further response, always maintaining a supportive, albeit, guiding voice, (*'I can see why you may have come to that conclusion, but if you take a closer look at...you may find you have overlooked...'*)
- Excite the students by sending them to a relevant website or current news headline in response to a post ( *'Dear All, I do see your point but have you ever considered what this means for.....take a look at www... and let me know if you still feel the same way about.....'*).
- Probe with a follow up question, promoting more critical thought (*'Mary, careful! While you have carefully assessed the organisation's apparent motive, in the light of...what must be the underlying hidden agenda?'*).
- Provoke the student by questioning findings (*'Heather, you maintain that..., but if we recall what we learned last week, isn't your statement in contradiction?'*)
- Challenge the non-participants to voice their views as well (*'Sam and Clara have come to an interesting conclusion. Does everyone agree with them?'*)
- Weave unifying themes together/point out disagreements to give the discussion meaning and bring students back on track, especially after a confusing round of posts.
- Never jump to conclusions. Before over-reacting to a seemingly thoughtless response, ask for clarification, eg *'I am sorry, Mark, but I don't quite understand your answer. Would you mind explaining what you mean by...'*

#### 4.2.4 Managing the challenging student

No two students are alike and while most adapt well to the online learning community others do so only poorly and can jeopardise the harmony and success of the online learning environment for all. The pro-active tutor recognises a potentially problematic student scenario and addresses the problem immediately.

The following list highlights six key characteristics the online tutor may need to pro-actively address, never in public, but rather in a private e-mail note to the student.

##### Lurking

**Signs:** There are none. The enrolled student is not an active discussion participant. More recent literature acknowledges the value of non-participation which is not seen only as a disadvantage to the non-participating student. However, this impedes management of group-work activities that would normally include the student later on and puts peers at an unfair disadvantage.

Reasons for a student's absence might be:

- login difficulties
- unexpected personal problems
- discomfort with using computers, online discussion board
- fear of revealing poor writing skills
- fear of the permanency of written record.

**Suggested response:** Check the student tracking record to trace passive online activity. You may find that the student in fact reads all the discussion threads. This could indicate either a preference for learning from the responses of others or a high level of online anxiety. It is a situation that needs to be sensitively addressed such as in a friendly, personal e-mail/phone to offer support. (eg *'Dear Sharon, you have not participated in any of the online discussions so far. Are you having technical difficulties? Possibly you are feeling uncomfortable about sharing ideas and thoughts online? I am more than happy to discuss these issues with you and we are sure to find a working solution. Cordially, Your Tutor*).

##### Bullying

**Signs:** This student is intolerant of opposing viewpoints. He or she provokes aggression by making inflammatory remarks or responding in an emotional or irrational manner.

**Suggested response:** Initially, this student should be given the benefit of the doubt and prompted in the discussion board, in a friendly tone, to further explain the remark. Should the tutor feel affirmed of intentional misconduct, however, this student will need to be warned immediately in a personal e-mail that previous comments have offended other students and that this behaviour is unacceptable. He or she is reminded of the class code of conduct/ netiquette guidelines and it

should be stressed that the student is risking expulsion from the class pending further disciplinary action by the school if the behaviour persists.

### Overachieving

**Signs:** This student over fulfils the online participation requirement by far, responding not only to every question but to every student post as well-often before the tutor. In responses this student seemingly displays expertise and assumes the role of moderator, but often adds topic-unrelated material, which can include personal anecdotes, or irrelevant follow-up questions, which can become very confusing and overpowering for the other students.

**Suggested response:** In a friendly, but clear e-mail message point out to the student that while the student's knowledge and communication skills are impressive, other less confident students may feel somewhat intimidated. Offer the student the opportunity to moderate a discussion later on in the term. Point out that the displayed leadership skills are sought after in the assigned group-work activity.

### Underachieving

**Signs:** This student waits for the very last minute to contribute to the online discussion, usually paraphrasing what another has written or reaffirming a statement made previously. The student shows little sign of original thought in responses and seemingly participates strategically only to fulfil an online participation requirement.

**Suggested response:** In a private e-mail carefully enquiring about the reasons may reveal that the student seemingly only has time on those days. Point out to the student that online participation is being graded according to a number of criteria which include research depth, originality of thought, and engagement which is not being fulfilled well and will be reflected in the online participation grade.

### Whining

**Signs:** This student challenges the expertise of the tutor, doubts the purpose of the tutor's assignments and activities, and complains excessively. This student publicly criticises the quality of course materials and may even question the tutor's authority. Comments can include, 'I thought this was a science class?' 'I may be stepping out on a limb here, but something tells me our instructor has never taught online before.' 'You're the expert, not me, so don't expect me to know.' 'Have you ever considered how unreasonable it is to expect a working adult to actually read all of this?'

**Suggested response:** As long as the workload and expected time commitment have been clearly communicated on the first day of the term, the student is being unreasonable. Remind the student of the workload commitment in a friendly and empathetic e-mail. Acknowledging the online learner's effort but requesting that

complaints of any nature to be reserved for private e-mail communication only, will help keep topic-related online discussions focused.

### Dropping Out

**Signs:** On occasion, despite meticulous preparation and well-established ground rules, students may react hurt or feel offended by comments made either by fellow students or even the tutor himself, both parties completely unaware of the offence. This is usually made evident by a sudden disappearance of an otherwise engaged student.

**Suggested response:** As soon as an otherwise active student goes missing he or she should be contacted by e-mail as the chances of the student withdrawing completely are high at this point. Explain that there has been a misunderstanding and there was no intention to offend, whatsoever. Written responses are easily misunderstood and encourage the student to enquire (to tutor or student) about a dubious remark made first, before assuming bad intentions.

## 5.0 Managing conflicts

Most students will be unaccustomed to online communication and unaware that it can be more prone to misunderstandings than face-to-face dialogue. In the absence of visual and oral cues constructive criticism may be perceived as unfairly critical and differences of opinion easily escalate to 'flaming'.

Despite clear netiquette guidelines (see [Appendix 8](#)) and all your efforts to role model good online conversant behaviour, online conflicts can arise and it is important to manage them as quickly and sensitively as possible in order to build and maintain a welcoming and trusting online learning environment for your students. Additionally, not addressing conflicts promptly can potentially have legal consequences if students feel inflammatory remarks are being ignored.

### 5.1 Strategies for avoiding conflict

#### 5.1.1 Online discussion

In all modes of online communication, the golden rule is to be considerate of others. Aside from pointing out netiquette guidelines (see [Appendix 8](#)) the following recommendations are made in order to best maintain a supportive asynchronous learning environment:

- Be online regularly throughout the week
- Respond to queries within 24–48 hour (let students know in the Module Guide how quickly they can expect your response)
- Allow enough time for students to feel comfortable with one another (eg in week 1 induction activities) before assigning module related discussion assignments
- Don't allow anonymous or editable posts.

### 5.1.2 Chat

In synchronous modes of communication it is important for students primarily to be aware of differences in connection and typing speeds. Those students with superior writing skills will be at more of a communicative advantage in the synchronous environment than in the asynchronous environment where all participants have time to revise and rewrite.

Chat room activities are best restricted to five or less students. Consider making use of the 'handraise mode' feature. For the sake of avoiding misunderstandings in written communication guidelines it is recommended to insist that student adhere to chatroom guidelines that emphasise:

- Patience, patience, patience
- Proper introductions upon entering the chatroom
- Extra consideration for non-native speakers
- Proper punctuation
- Brevity
- Proper farewells upon exiting the chatroom.

### 5.1.3 Group-work

Conflicts in the online group scenario usually arise due to lack of participation by one or two group members which causes feelings of resentment and anger in the rest of the group. Aside from concise group-work guidelines (see [Appendix 9](#)) the following managerial steps can help avoid problems:

- Keep group size at 5-7 students
- For ease of connecting make as many modes of online communication (group chat/discussion/e-mail) as possible available to the group
- Wait to assign group-work tasks until a few weeks (3-4) into the term
- Give the groups enough time to connect (1-2 weeks) before working on the assignment (taking time zone differences and work schedules into account)
- Require that all contributions to and decisions about the assignment be either recorded or repeated publicly in the asynchronous discussion area on a regular (weekly) basis which you monitor
- Send the chairperson a friendly e-mail on a regular basis enquiring about the progress of the assignment or any problems
- Assign different students each week to post weekly updates of progress (in a blog, for example).

## 5.2 Conflict handling tips

Despite all precautionary measures, misunderstandings and conflicts will still arise. In order to resolve conflicts online it is important to be as careful in tone and as explicit in meaning as possible.

The following are tips for handling conflicts online:

- Stop, reread the post and think about the possible reasons for the inappropriate behaviour displayed. Does the student have a reason to be angry? What might you have failed to recognise beforehand?
- Ask a peer you trust to read the post and comment on it and your proposed reaction.
- How a person reads and perceives a written message may not be what it was intended to mean by the author. In a private e-mail ask the student, *'When you remarked...what exactly did you mean...'* or *'Is it possible that you meant...?'*
- Remind the class in the online announcements area how difficult it can be to express oneself well online and to be patient and tolerant of one another.
- In the rare cases of repeatedly inappropriate, offensive or hostile remarks the student should be denied access to the discussion board or chat room and his or her remarks removed. In such a case it is best to seek advice from the school's academic conduct officer (ACO) on how to proceed further.
- If a non-participating group member fails to respond to efforts of the group chairperson you may decide to intervene. In a private e-mail to the student first express your concern, *'Your fellow group members look forward to working with you-are you having connection problems...?'* or *'Is there anything I can do to help you contribute to your group?'* If the student fails to respond, follow up with a polite but clear explanation of the purpose of the group-work task and the consequences of failing to participate. To the rest of the group it is vital that you share your empathy with them as it will have been a disappointing and frustrating experience for them.

### 5.2.1 Flaming e-mails to the tutor

In addition to conflicts between students, students may act inappropriately to you. Students frustrated by administrative or technical problems may turn to you the tutor to vent anger inappropriately in an e-mail, for example. Hostile, provocative ('flaming') e-mail including abusive, inappropriate language and/or accusations should be dealt with as soon as possible (ie, within 24 hours). See [Appendix 10](#) for a list of flaming mail handling tips.

► See [Unit 8](#) for further guidance and examples of how best to support students.

## 6.0 Further reading

Anderson, T. (Ed) (2008) *Theory and practice of online learning* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Ch. 14 Teaching in an online learning context. Available online at <http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120146>

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