



Curtin University

The Role of the Tutor in Online Learning

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Some Background

- Curtin University offers the Bachelor of Education in 3 modes:
 - Face to face
 - Regional
 - Online (OUA)

All three match in content and assessment

All three use Blackboard as the LMS



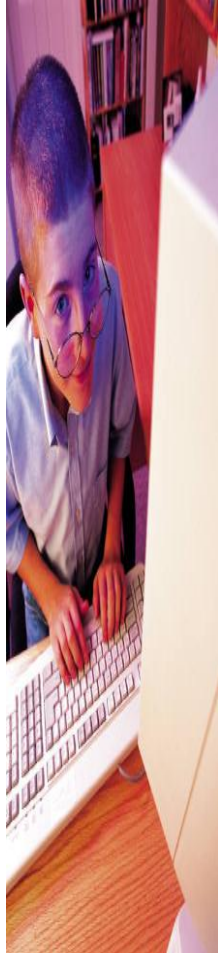
The Role of the Online Educator is Crucial

- TO BE EFFECTIVE HOWEVER.....
- Teachers require much more than technical competence
- They need to have an understanding of dynamics of online communication and interactions



Positive online engagement – What are some of the issues?

- Students have rarely met one another or their teacher
- Communication is void of visual clues
- Time management can be problematic
- Difficulties around the monitoring of individual learning



The Online Course

- Students are from all states in Australia and international
- Six out of eight first year units have open access
- Open access units typically have around 2000 enrolments



The Typical (open access) Student

- Variety of backgrounds (not necessarily typical of a first year cohort)
 - In full time work
 - Young children to care for
 - Not studied for a long time
 - Left school before completing Year 12
 - English language issues
 - Technologically inexperienced



The Typical Tutor

- All are qualified teachers (Primary or Secondary)
- Many still working in schools either full or part time
- Typically part-time, sessional tutors, with little experience of either university or online teaching
- Age range from 25 years – 65 plus years



What does the literature tell us?



- Teachers have influence in the learning process
- Student engagement is highly valued
- Teachers need pedagogical skills that encourage critical thinking
- Teachers need to manage a learning environment that encourages skills in independent as well as collaborative learning

Role of the Online Leader (what's in a name?)

■ Tutor?

Lecturer?

Teacher

Facilitator?

Guide on the side?

Promoter? Partner?

Manager

Discussion leader?

Negotiator?

E-Moderator



Complex role with challenges that should not be underestimated

- Many have little background or experience of online pedagogy
- Often asked to contribute to the development and delivery
- No clear picture of what the role looks like or should look like

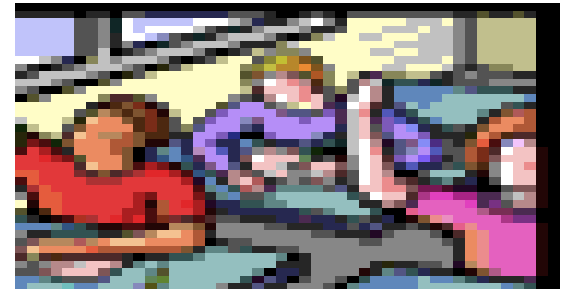


The Job?

Main issue?

How to initiate and *maintain effective* contact with students, particularly those new to study

HOWEVER!!!



Ideal teacher:student ratio of 1:30 (Arbraugh & Benhuman-Finch, 2006)

Curtin teacher:student ratio of 1:75

Pedagogical implications?

- Discussion boards and chat facilities are not used to full effectiveness. Why?
 - Cultural
 - Linguistic
 - Technology
 - Academic writing
 - Irrelevant posting

(Mishra & Juwah (2006))



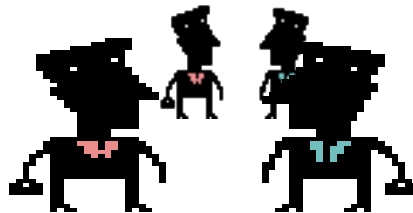
The danger with online discussion!

- It should ***not*** be an avenue to “read what everyone says, but write what you think”

(Wood, 2002)



- Rather.....



- It should be a genuine opportunity to share, develop and consolidate ideas.

What might it look like?

- Learners need opportunities to be socialised in the effective use of a discussion board
- Purpose and intended outcomes for the discussion must be established
- Feed – forward given as a summary to assist with focusing of the learning
- Tutor should be continually reviewing the conversations for irrelevance and steering the discussion in a more meaningful direction



What Curtin tutors consider to be significant

- The Background - 52 tutors at a training day (divided into 5 groups)
 - 35 undergraduate teaching qualifications
 - 12 with Masters
 - 5 with Doctorates
- 10 were 'brand new'
- 6 had completed eight study periods
- 36 had a range of between two and seven study periods' experience



Highlights of online teaching

- Autonomous but connected

Stay at home and miss the ‘politics’ and ‘traffic’

Opportunities to watch students grow over a study period

Close connections and relationships

Intellectually challenging

Strong collegial, sharing aspect of the role



Flexibility/continuous learning

- Earn from home
- Semi-retired but still involved in education
- Kept informed of latest developments
- Work with adults not children
- Expand IT skills
- Develop a pathway to academia



The Challenges?

- Large numbers = Issues with the marking of assignments
 - Marking such large numbers in the required time frame while giving quality feedback is a constant issue*
 - Marking is all consuming*
 - The volume of marking means many hours of unpaid work*
 - Day to day aspects are great...but that sudden increase in workload at marking time...*



Overcoming Distance – for staff and students

Isolation

Feelings of being alone

Difficult to maintain ‘live’ discussion in different time zones



Work/Life Balance and Time Management

I spend many hours developing relationships with my students

The hours of work impact on my family life

I have to work hard to ensure the workload does not encroach on family time

Constant battle not to spread myself too thin

I have a family who need my attention too

You have to compartmentalise the job to stop it becoming all time consuming



The Dilemma - How to support and encourage when the students...

- Are needy
- Want instant feedback
- Demand attention
- Have unreasonable expectations

- **For tutors this can**

Be very stressful

Be time consuming

Take time away from engaging with other students



What does interaction and engagement 'look like'?

- Interaction equates with success
- More interaction means more understanding
- Interaction should be rewarded with marks
- Interaction could be peer assessed



Interaction takes three forms

- **Tutor interactions** through

Training days

Tutor training on a blackboard site

Tutor lounge

“...getting us all together is so important. It can be very lonely out there. I love being part of such a large group of people striving to improve what we do”



Student-student interactions

- “...students need to understand that engagement is an important part of their learning”

Needy students seem to not want to be active. They don't realise that always getting the answer from me is not going to help with real understanding. If I can't get them active on the board, they stay needy students and are unlikely to be successful



Culture needs to be...?

- *An environment that is supportive and safe*
- *One that involves giving and taking constructive criticism from peers*
- *One where there is an understanding that regurgitation does not demonstrate understanding*
- *A place where opportunities are created to enable everyone to jump in when they want to contribute, allowing students to feed off one another's ideas.*



How to do this?

- The tasks need to encourage interaction not just posting an idea
- Open ended tasks where students have to work out the best way of achieving an outcome
- Always bringing it back to what happens in a classroom



Summary – Plusses and Minuses

- Tutors felt supported in their role
- Tutors valued opportunities for collaboration and improvement of practice
- Difficult to separate work and home
- Marking is the most stressful aspect of the work
- Dilemmas around how to encourage active participation while making links between the theories and the culture of the teaching profession



Final thought

- The quality of the tutors, and therefore their training needs to be an essential aspect of any online course.
- This requires ongoing monitoring, developing and sharing of good practice...
- What can you share with us today?

