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“WAS SHE SMILING AS SHE TYPED THAT?”: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO ONLINE TUTOR COMPETENCIES AND THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT THOSE COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of online tutors, online students and online unit coordinators to discover what they feel are the competencies possessed by online tutors in interactive text-based online units. An ethnographic approach was used in online tertiary classes chosen for their use of interactive delivery technology.

The study spanned one University semester and examined the competencies of the online tutors of these classes. Data collection occurred from before the units started and finished after the units ended. Data analysis began with the first collection of data and continued throughout and after data collection finished. The study focused on the instructional and guidance roles of online tutors rather than the roles of unit coordinators or developers of instructional material.

This research study identified the online tutors' competencies and classified the competencies according to five categories and twenty-six sub-categories created by the researcher. The study also identified a number of factors that affect the competencies of online tutors.

Keywords

Interaction, Tutor competencies, Online learning

Introduction

With the increased efficiency and reliability of postal services in the late 1900s, distance education became more popular in society in the form of correspondence courses (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). As radio, and later, television were introduced to society, they too affected the way distance education was presented. More recently, the Internet has had a profound impact with the creation of a new delivery opportunity for distance education (Volery, 2001).

As with all new approaches to human activity, there is a process of reorganising thinking that Rogers (1995) describes as diffusion of innovation. One creator of inertia to pedagogical change has been that the lack of formal and informal apprenticeship opportunities as there has been no one to observe in order to learn by watching when it comes to new things like online tutoring (Salmon, 2000).

While it is clear that online learning is expanding rapidly (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001) it is not clear whether this is translating into improved or even equivalent learning outcomes for students. There is evidence in the literature that online students want to be involved with units that have a tutor to help them with the process of learning online according to Goodyear et al, (2001)

and Masie (2000) but there is little detailed literature regarding the competencies (ie. skills and traits) needed to be an online tutor in relation to the roles they are required to play. This study attended to this gap in the literature on the topic of the competencies required by online tutors by beginning to address the question “What are the relationships between the factors that affect the competencies required by online tutors in tertiary education and the competencies displayed?” The study did not consider the role of online unit designers, but rather its focus was on the tutors’ interaction with the students, not the creation of online units.

Competencies is a term used throughout the literature to describe many different descriptors of tutors and their actions. Furst-Bowe (1996) use competencies to describe knowledge, skills, and abilities, that is opposed to Schoenfeld-Tacher & Persichette (2000) who separate skills from competencies that include knowledge, character traits, abilities and strategies.

Online Tutor Competencies

A comprehensive review of the literature on individual online tutor competencies and the methods of classification resulted in a list of over 500 competencies being identified. This led to a decision to focus on a limited number of sources (Berge, 1995; Cyr, 1997; Goodyear et al., 2001; Salmon, 2000) as each additional source added both individual competencies and a new organizational schema for the competencies.

A number of categories may be identified that are a mix of what is constant in the literature and what is scattered throughout the literature. There were a large number of competencies and categories that were equivalent in various articles. Each individual competency was examined and sorted with other competencies that appeared to fit together. After the competencies from the literature were combined and sorted, the categorized groups of competencies were labelled based on categories used in the literature. This resulted in twenty six sub-categories that were further sorted into five categories, that are presented below in alphabetical order.

1. Content Expertise - This category encapsulates numerous themes from the literature as different authors dealt with this category in individual ways. Content Facilitator from Goodyear et al. (2001) and Content Expertise from Salmon (2000) are similar to this category. In this schema, these themes cover analysis of student questions, having students do relevant educational tasks, enriching students interactions with the content through finding & providing appropriate content resources.
2. Course Management - This is a category that accumulates competencies that deal with offering, managing and administrating an online educational experience, but do not fit in any of the other categories I have examined. Administrator / Manager from Goodyear et al. (2001) and Berge’s (1995) Managerial Facilitation are quite close to Course Management.
3. Evaluation - Authors have divided this category into very different schemas. Goodyear et al. (2001) divides this category into its assessor, researcher and designer roles. Cyr (1997) does not even have it as a separate category but includes bits of it throughout his schema. Berge (1995) includes this category in his pedagogical facilitation. This category is about the evaluation of the entire online educational offering, providing assessment for students as well as evaluating the course and planning changes, modifications or corrections to improve the entire online educational experience.
4. Process Facilitation - This is the category with the largest number of individual competencies in this organizational schema and the literature is filled with examples of aspects of process facilitation. This category is diffused throughout Berge (1995) having items in many of his categories. Goodyear et al. (2001) have designer and process facilitator roles with similarities to this category. Salmon (2000) has similar categories including understanding of online process, personal characteristics and online communication skills.
5. Technical Knowledge - Throughout the literature, this type of theme is consistent in lists of required

competencies for online tutors. The literature used general terms, like Berge’s (1995) use of “technical”, to Goodyear et al. (2001) use of “technologist”, to Salmon’s (2000) use of “technical skills”.

As the basis of the five competencies, the over five hundred individual competencies were sorted into twenty-six sub-competencies that were then grouped accordingly to make up the five competencies. A figure of the competencies and the corresponding sub-competencies can be seen in Figure 1.

Content Expertise	Course Management	Evaluation	Process Facilitation	Technical Knowledge
Content Expert	Administration	Assessment	Communication	Attitude
Enriching interactions	Institution contact	Feedback	Confidence	Choice
Finding & providing resources	Management	Monitoring	Disposition	Resources
Question analysis	Pedagogy	Unit evolution	Environment creation & maintenance	Technical pedagogy
Relevant tasks			Facilitating	Technical support
			Pedagogical	Use technology

Figure 1: Online tutor competency and sub-competency categories

Data Collection and Analysis

There was quantitative data collected from the tutors and students before and after the six units started. Qualitative data was collected from all three educational stakeholders: students, tutors and unit coordinators at various phases of the data collection process. All the unit coordinators and tutors associated with the units involved with the study were interviewed as well as at least one student per unit. Interviews with unit coordinators during the course of the unit and interviews with tutors and selected students after the unit ended were supplemented by qualitative data collected through the observation, both electronic and face to face, that took place as the units progressed. The units varied from objectivist to constructivist in design, encompassing both undergraduate and post graduate levels with the number of students in the units ranged from as few as three to as many as fifty with this number changing in a few units as students withdrew during the semester. The roles and responsibilities of the tutors in this study depended on the unit they were associated with, the design of the units and the role played by each of the unit coordinators.

A great deal of rich data was collected throughout the data collection process. As this was an ethnographic study, the data that was collected was constantly being reviewed throughout the data collection phase of the study. The data collected in the earlier parts of the study were used to inform the data collection that occurred later in the process. The earlier data was constantly referred to in the creation of interview questions and observation points for later phases of data collection. This led to all the previously collected data being the basis for the tutor interviews, that were the overriding sources of information for this study.

Figure 2 is a chart showing method map of the data collection phases and what data sources were drawn on in each phase and how they were drawn on.

Phases	Online Unit Stakeholders		
	Unit Coordinators	Students	Tutors
1 Pre-Unit		Pre- Unit online Survey to all students	Pre- Unit online Survey to all tutors
2 During Unit	Interviews	Electronic Observation	Electronic Observation, Face-to-face Observation
3 Unit Wrap-up		Post- Unit online Survey to all students	Post- Unit online Survey to all tutors
4 Post-Unit		Interviews	Interviews

Figure 2: Method map of data collection

As the research questions focused on the competencies of online tutors, the decision was made to use the data gleaned from the online tutor interviews as the central emphasis of the analysis, with the online unit coordinator and online student interview data being considered secondary sources of information. From there, an attempt was successfully made to triangulate the findings made from the tutor interview data with the secondary sources of information collected in this study, as well as with the observations and questionnaires as supplementary sources of data.

As the online tutor interviews were analysed, it became apparent there were themes identified that ran throughout their interviews. Each interview was then analysed independent of the other five and the themes within the interview were defined and temporarily labelled based on the content area of the themes. Examples of the temporary labels included: “Facilitate content understanding - Understanding of how learning takes place”, “Use Tech to aid content understanding”, “Student engagement - motivation - get students active online”.

The most commented on themes in each of the six tutors’ interviews were compiled together resulting in thirty-nine total themes on a spreadsheet arranged according to the name of the tutor. The themes were then categorized independent of the tutors, across all the tutor interviews. Based on the content of each theme and the way the individual tutor presented their thoughts, eleven categories were evident in the themes. The categories and early analysis definitions were:

1. Communication Issues - student / tutor - How the communication between the tutor and the student(s) affected how things went in the unit.
2. Community - The learning and social communities (or lack thereof) created by the design of the unit, the actions of the tutors and the actions of the students.
3. Delivery - The issues of the delivery systems and media (CD/web/broadband), procedures put in place to run the unit.
4. Design - How the design of the unit and the materials affected the competencies required by the online tutor.
5. Institutional Issues - How the unit is affected by the policies, procedures and supposed beliefs of the institution that is offering it.
6. Pedagogy - How the pedagogical beliefs of the tutor and unit coordinators involved throughout the unit affected the competencies required by the online tutor.
7. Student Attributes - Student motivation and abilities, student expectations and their adaptability to the online education culture.
8. Student Responsibility - What students are responsible for according to the tutor, the unit designer and the university. Not necessarily what the students think they are responsible for.
9. Technical Issues - This was everything regarding technology including learning to use it, potential access problems, and how to use it in a proper pedagogic manner.
10. Tutor Attributes - Tutor attitudes, feelings, motivation, ability to understand student viewpoints, facilitation.
11. Tutor Experience - The experience (or lack thereof) the tutor has dealing with aspects of tutoring online and how that affects the unit being tutored.

The tutor interviews were analysed again with the knowledge that there were a number of themes running throughout the interviews. This previous attempt allowed for a deeper focus for the analysis, especially for concepts that were basic underlying beliefs in the tutors' practice, such as situations where tutors did not repeatedly mention certain aspects of their competencies as they were assumed or obvious to the online tutors. An example of understated skills and traits in the online tutor interviews was in the area of content expertise.

The online tutors in this study were all approached to tutor their particular units partially because of their expertise in the content of the unit. All the tutors briefly mentioned this, however content expertise was rarely mentioned by them during the interviews. There seemed to be an "of course I am a content expert" feeling to this concept as it was an underlying certainty to their view of themselves as online tutors.

The standard definitions for the eleven categories was a necessary step for the organization of the themes evident in the interviews as there were several interviews which had comments that were seemingly covered by a number of first review tutor themes. One tutor's first review had themes that differentiated between "the tutor as guide" and "student motivator" as well as "content facilitator" and "content expert". The process of creating the definitions provided a structure for clarity of thought the researcher used to differentiate between similar concepts.

The collection and analysis of the definitions for the interview themes showed that the creation of the definitions was not a quick process, rather it was methodical and well thought out. Some of the categorizations in the interviews were very obvious after all the data was examined, such as "Technical Issues" and "Communication - Student / Tutor". Other categorizations required much more thought as the tutors did not seem to have put as much thought into things like "Design / Pedagogy" in the units they were working in. Since the tutors in this study did not have any input to the design of the unit before they started tutoring and many of the tutors were not trained educators, it was understandable that the design of the unit was not foremost on their list of concerns to discuss, especially since this study did not aim to explore design issues to any great extent.

There was a concern with the categorization process because there was resistance to grouping different themes from same tutor into one bigger category. The example of this is treatment of one tutor's themes of "Care about students as people" and "Online Presence / Charisma" and the hesitation to group them together with another tutors' themes in the "Tutor as a person" category in the second review that eventually formed the basis of the "Tutor Personality" category.

By the end of the second review of the tutor interviews, the eleven interview categories had definitions and it became obvious that there was more grouping needed to achieve a quality list of categories. A number of categories from the original eleven were merged or reworked, such as the "Design" and "Pedagogy" categories. There were other changes including the "Delivery" category was examined and reworked leaving its contents to better fit into the new "Technical Issues", "Facilitation of Learning" and "Content Issues" categories.

Factors that affect online tutor competencies

The reworking of the categories that were identified as factors that affect online tutor competencies resulted in a framework consisting of thirteen factor categories to replace the original eleven interview theme categories from the earlier reviews of the data. The themes were identified as factors that affect online tutor competencies because there were several categories that had little, if anything, to do with the online tutor and their abilities. The "Student Expectations" and "Student Responsibilities" categories were the two that were most apparently out of the realm of the tutors' skills and traits. After examining the categories in relation to the literature, there were a number of consistencies with the themes and the factors that affected online tutor competencies according to the literature.

The categories were also found to be consistent throughout the other sources of information collected during this study, most noticeably in the online student interviews and the online unit coordinator

interviews. This triangulation of data also extended to the supplementary sources of data that were collected. This process of analysis and triangulation resulted in having thirteen factors that were identified as having an affect on online tutor competencies in current text-based tertiary units. The factors are:

1. Community - The learning community (or lack thereof) created by the design of the unit, the actions of the tutors and the actions of the students.
2. Content Expertise - The tutor showing an expertise in the content area.
3. Content Issues - Issues dealing with the educational material used in the unit; including how the materials were presented, access issues, and how the students interacted with the materials.
4. Design / Pedagogy - How the pedagogy involved with the design and presentation of the unit affects the students and tutors.
5. Facilitation of Learning - How the tutor helped the students interact the content without direct instruction that encompasses the tutors understanding of how learning takes place.
6. Institutional Issues - How the unit is affected by the policies, procedures and supposed beliefs of the institution that is offering it.
7. Interaction student / tutor - The interaction between the tutor and the student in all situations, at a distance, in person and facilitated by technology.
8. Management of Teaching Processes - The non-instructional teaching processes involved with tutoring, including marking, preparation time and time management.
9. Student Expectations - What students believe as compared to what the tutor believes or what the situation really is.
10. Student Responsibility - What students are responsible for according to the tutor, the unit designer and the university. Not necessarily what the students think they are responsible for.
11. Technical Issues - This was everything regarding technology including learning to use it, potential access problems, and how to use it in a proper pedagogic manner.
12. Tutor Experience - The experience (or lack thereof) the tutor has dealing with aspects of tutoring online and how that affects the unit being tutored.
13. Tutor Personality - The tutor as a person dealing with emotions, behaviours and personality.

Conclusion

This data has been collected and categorized as part of a study exploring what competencies are needed to be an online tutor. This study helps to address the gap in the literature regarding the competencies required by online educators, while identifying what current educational stakeholders perceive as the factors that affect the competencies required to be an online tutor.

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