

## **Online facilitation and the role of the Tutor**

This document has been created by staff in the Faculty of Education who are experienced in teaching online<sup>1</sup> to help guide staff new to the online learning environment. The first section defines online facilitation, identifies some of the inherent challenges, describes the various roles of the tutor, and suggests some effective strategies for engaging the students. The second section lists some 'dos and don'ts' to guide our tutors as they begin their critical role in MyLO. In the final section, one of our experienced online tutors, Peter Osborne, shares his experience and thoughts on the role of the online tutor. Finally, there is a reference list that might be a useful starter to those who would like to explore the literature a little more (in all your spare time, we hear you say!)

We hope you find this document a useful resource. Don't forget that support is always available for our tutors – Unit Coordinators, other experienced teaching staff, TILT Educational Developers and the Course Coordinators are all happy to help out when required. There are often workshops during the year, and the Graduate Certificate of University Teaching and Learning has units focussed on teaching in the online environment.

Most importantly, enjoy your role as an online tutor! We know that it can be a rewarding, fulfilling role that really can make the world of difference for our online students. While it can feel very different to tutoring face-to-face, it is still possible to experience a wonderful connection with students and to be confident that you have made their learning journey more enjoyable and productive.

### **Section 1: Online facilitation**

#### **What is meant by 'online facilitation'?**

We define online facilitation as the process of encouraging interaction with and between students, supporting learning activities and helping make the use of technology 'easier' for the people we are working with, in order to foster greater engagement and learning. It is sometimes referred to as online moderation, or e-moderation (Salmon, 2013). Using the term 'facilitation' is useful as it indicates a student-centred approach to teaching and highlights that students should be actively involved in the learning process, rather than passive receivers of information uploaded into the online learning environment.

#### **The challenges of the online environment, and why tutors are so important:**

As is the case for many tertiary institutions around the world, the University of Tasmania is rapidly increasing its offerings of fully online units and courses of study. The adoption of online teaching and learning in the higher education sector has been widespread and is now found across a range of disciplines (e.g., business, education, health, psychology, accounting and information technology) and

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a range of program levels. Online courses provide a borderless market for universities and colleges without adding pressure to on-campus infrastructure. Between 2009 and 2014 the online education industry in Australia has experienced an annual growth of 14.4% with estimated revenue of over \$6 billion dollars (IBS World, 2014). In the US, approximately 33% of all higher education students enrolled in higher education in 2007 were undertaking at least some of their study online (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Achieving student enrolments is only the first step; next comes the need to provide an engaging and effective learning environment that retains students (beyond census date) and assists them to successfully complete their course of study. The literature (e.g. U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Yin, Urven, Schramm & Friedman, 2002) reports that students who complete their course in an online environment, achieve marks that are higher on average than for on-campus students, so it is possible to create an effective environment. Other statistics, however, are more sobering: the drop out rate in students studying online is higher than for students studying on campus (DEST, 2002; Liaw, 2009; Morris, Finnegan & Wu, 2005; Hrastiski, 2009) and despite the ongoing debate to identify the reasons for this (e.g. Carr, 2000; DEST, 2002; Downing & Chim, 2004; Hughes, 2007; Morris & Finnegan, 2008) it appears that there is still much to learn in relation to what an ideal online learning environment looks like and feels like for a student.

We believe that a sound understanding of our students and their needs is critical to the creation of an effective online learning environment. The terms 'digital natives' or 'Net generation' are often used to describe the generation born between 1980 and 1994 (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998), and it is these students who are likely to make up a significant percentage of our current and near-future cohort. It is suggested that this cohort have been immersed in technology all their lives, and have a high level of comfort and skill in such an environment. Providing learning environments that assume skills in accessing information through technology, multi-tasking, actively experimenting and collaborating with others online has become common amongst providers of learning. However, as these providers also grapple with the high attrition rate amongst their online learners, there is a growing body of writers who are beginning to question the assumptions we make about our students' skills in an online environment.

It appears there is still a significant proportion of students who do not have the levels of access or the technology skills often assumed. Several large studies (Kvavik, Caurso & Morgan, 2004; Kennedy, Krause, Judd, Churchward & Gray, 2006) in the US and Australia have found that while students do use a wide range of technologies in their daily lives, there were many areas where their familiarity and confidence with technology were limited. It seems that we can expect a lack of homogeneity in the student cohort, particularly in the first year of their university experience and that the potential 'digital divide' between these students signals a need for significant support as they commence their studies. For example, an Australian study (Kennedy *et al*, 2006) found that the proportion of first year students

(University of Melbourne) who had never used a particular technology tool (e.g. creating a web site, keeping a blog, using a web conferencing tool, using RSS feeds) outstripped the proportion who had.

Another study (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008) has indicated that whilst students are happy to use the internet as part of their studies, there is evidence that this generation of students tend to use a 'snatch and grab' approach to information gathering, and have "shallow, random and often passive interactions with text, which raise significant questions about what digital natives can actually do as they engage with and make meaning from such technology" (p. 781). The skills that make a student successful at managing today's technological environment are not necessarily applicable to academic tasks such as information gathering, problem solving, synthesising and evaluation.

It is in this environment that our teaching staff will be working. It is up to us to ensure that we not only motivate, engage and retain our students, but also ensure that the learning experience is a positive one for all students regardless of their pre-course experience in an online environment. Structures need to be in place to ensure that students are guided, monitored and supported as they learn the skills critical to studying in the online environment and can then progress towards their desired learning outcomes. The student cohort is increasingly diverse, but it must feel safe and conducive for learning, regardless of prior experience and predisposition for online learning technologies.

### **How will we know if we are being effective?**

The most obvious signs of an effective environment will be the retention of students and the successful completion of their studies, with positive student evaluations at the end of the semester. During the semester, characteristics suggested by Collison, Erlbaum, Haavind and Tinker (2000, p. 77) that indicate a positive environment include:

- Participants post messages and participate in discussion forums regularly ('regularly' being defined as appropriate to the context);
- The online community meets its members' needs, and participants express honest opinions;
- Participant-to-participant collaboration and teaching are evident, and spontaneous moderating occurs among the participants;
- Reasonable venting about technology is acceptable and evident, and;
- Participants show concern and support for the community.

It is also vital that the teaching staff are seen to have a positive attitude to the online learning environment and have the confidence and the ability to be innovative and experimental (Downing & Dymont, 2013). While the online facilitator (tutor/teacher) may also be the developer of the unit content and therefore a subject expert, it is not the only important aspect. Other skills become vitally important though, such as:

- The ability to progress conversations from a surface level to a deeper and more meaningful one;

- The ability to keep track of individual students and recognise when a student is at risk of becoming disengaged;
- Skills in encouraging students to take responsibility for themselves, and supporting them as they do so;
- Skills in the administrative and technical support issues associated with an online learning environment;
- Knowing when to step in, and when to step back, from discussions and student interaction;
- Being able to articulate how to reason, solve problems and generally assist students to become aware of their own thinking processes, and;
- The ability to attend to the social aspect of learning as well, and help to build a feeling of community in the online environment.

### **Possible roles for the online tutor:**

Before the start of semester, make sure that you have received clear guidelines on what you are expected to do. It is the role of the Unit Coordinator to ensure that tutors know exactly what they are expected to do and have been supported in learning how to do it! Don't be afraid to ask the Unit Coordinator if you have any questions about your role or need some help to master the technical or pedagogical tasks. Remember too that the expectations may be different between Unit Coordinators, so ask early and often if you are unsure. Some of the questions that the teaching team should discuss early on might include clarification on how often tutors are expected to engage in the Discussion Board, whether they can start their own topics, load up extra resources, and so on. It is important that all students experience a similar learning experience, so equality in the ways tutors manage their groups is critical.

Most Unit Coordinators will recognise the importance of setting, managing and meeting student expectations in relation to what they can expect from their online tutor/lecturer. Students come into an online learning environment with their own individual expectations of what will be provided in the way of support. It seems reasonable to expect that initially students will carry over what they expect in a face-to-face environment into a virtual one; so they may expect a 'teacher in the room' whenever they themselves are there. The level of tutor support that will be provided needs to be clearly communicated to students early in each semester. Tutors then need to be able to provide that level of support consistently throughout the semester. It is also important to note that it is not helpful to the students when well-meaning lecturers/tutors extend their level of support way above this, as the students reset their expectations and risk being disappointed when another tutor/lecturer does not live up to another's performance.

Generally, one of the key roles of a tutor is to encourage student engagement. This engagement will most likely start with a social form of engagement, such as introductions in the Discussion Board or other activities that generate communication with and between students. An early role is also likely to be in the form of technical support, helping students navigate the online environment and locate key documents, such as the Unit Outline. Try to respond in a timely manner to student requests for help,

and setting up a discussion topic that is dedicated to technical questions may help you to quickly identify and respond to those types of concerns.

As the semester progresses, your role as a tutor will extend to other forms of engagement, and in particular, encouraging the students to engage academically and intellectually with the activities in the unit. In many ways, your role as an online tutor is to model the kind of engagement we are seeking from our students, so interacting regularly with the students, responding to questions and encouraging a deep approach to learning will all help to build a strong tutor group. Your role will also extend to keeping the group moving together as much as possible, so that discussions are meaningful to all. In an online environment, where students may have purposely chosen that mode because of other commitments in life, keeping the group moving together can be tricky but it is vital if the online dialogue is to be a useful and purposeful strategy. It is a matter of knowing when to push, when to pull, and when to perhaps contact particular students privately to encourage more interaction. It is also important to know when to respond to students individually in a group discussion, and when to let the students take responsibility for the interaction themselves. Students do look for a personal response to their postings, especially their first one, so one it may work best to respond individually in the very first discussion topic, but thereafter come in only to encourage, probe more deeply, make summaries and so on.

At the other extreme, it is also important that students do not feel overwhelmed by the number of postings on the discussion board. While some students will enjoy reading hundreds of messages posted by their peers, others will find it intimidating, annoying, distracting or negative in some other way. It is enough to make some students withdraw, as they feel isolated and disengaged with the community they have joined. Tutors can minimise this risk by encouraging students to stay 'on-task', creating separate topics for social chatter, and developing some 'netiquette' rules in relation to social posts. Tutors might also choose to summarise multiple posts to help students who do not want to read each and every post. Even better, perhaps, is to encourage students to take on this role, perhaps by nominating one student each week. Remember, we are trying to encourage student activity and engagement, not a passive approach to their learning.

### **Models of online facilitation:**

While there are many models available to assist teachers and tutors in the online environment, Gilly Salmon's (2013) model of teaching online perhaps offers the most useful guide to new tutors. The important thing to note from Gilly Salmon's model is the time and effort required to get to the 'learning' stage. The need for teaching staff to provide technical support and moderate student activity is consistent throughout all stages, but the early focus is on helping students access the different areas of the online course, make a social connection with others, and then moving on to learning activities and deepening their knowledge. In a thirteen week semester, it may take two or three weeks to move students through the first two stages of the model. Only once students feel comfortable, supported,

and capable of working well in the online environment can teaching staff expect a higher level of academic engagement. So be patient in those early weeks, and you will be rewarded later on!

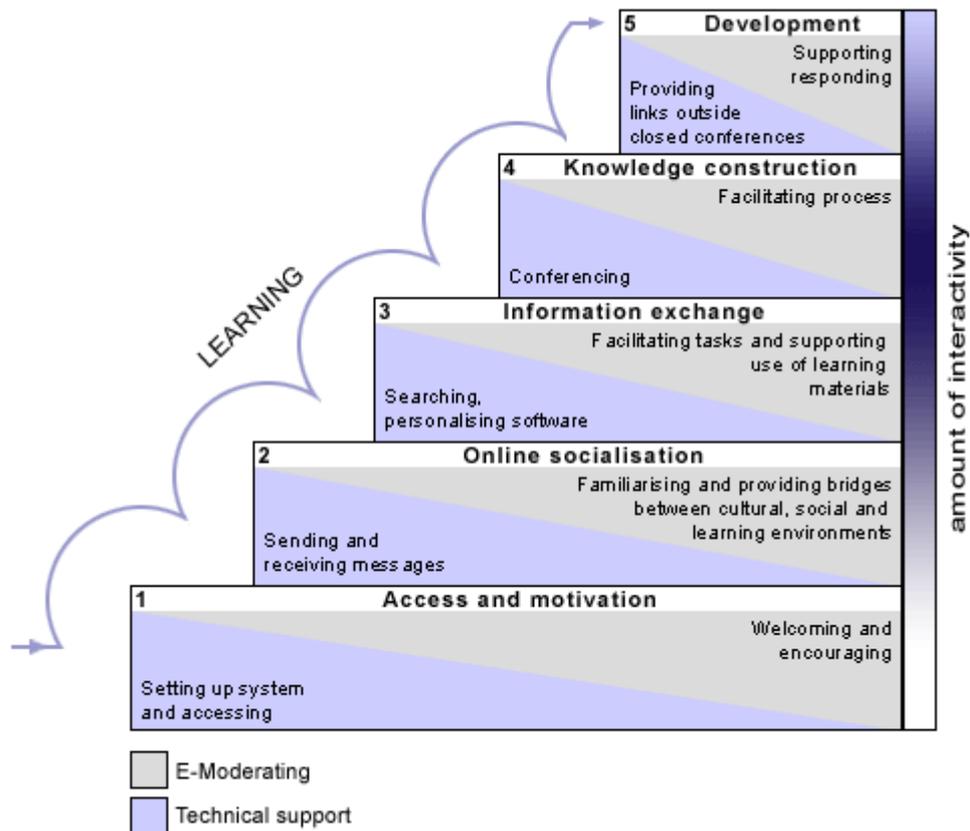


Figure 1: Model of teaching and learning online (Salmon, 2013, p.29)

**Conclusion:**

The online learning environment offers much for the student and the number of enrolments will no doubt continue to climb over the coming years. It is the responsibility of all teaching staff to ensure that students' expectations and behaviours in these environments continue to be monitored, discussed and responded to if we are to retain their engagement and provide them with a pathway for successful study. There is also no doubt that students do need to see regular participation by the tutor in the discussion board. Their contribution should be one that models the behaviour of an engaged student, that is, an enquiring, encouraging and constructive one. With careful selection of the tutoring staff and a well designed and supported development program, these tutors should be able to fulfil a critical role in the online learning program.

## Section 2: Dos and Don'ts for online tutors – suggestions from experienced tutors!

- Read all the unit materials including the readings, lecture notes, and be familiar with the assessment tasks and requirements
- Get to know your students - don't forget that online students are real people
- External students work in schools (either voluntarily or in a paid capacity) – encourage them to connect the content to their context
- Approach the unit from the perspective of a learner and respond to the weekly activities as a learner. This models good practice for the students.
- Check your spelling and grammar before you hit *Post* or go back to your post and edit if required. Model high-level personal literacy skills.
- Learn how to navigate around the library website and ensure you can access the library catalogue and e-reserve quickly
- Attend any web conferences scheduled during the semester in your unit/s
- Set up your online profile in MyLO (if the UC has enabled the profile in your unit/s)
- Establish an online presence – by responding to student posts; by being a 'real' person
- Don't give the students more work (that's the role of the UC) ... but do challenge their thinking
- Don't criticise students online ... if they've written something inappropriate contact the UC to delete the post and then contact the student promptly via email or phone
- Be friendly online – think about your tone and the words you use. Read the Netiquette document and adhere to these guidelines for online communication
- Ask questions – use critical and open-ended questioning as a major part of feedback to students' online contributions
- Respond to student questions promptly
- Check MyLO regularly, particularly in the first few weeks of semester (each day) and respond to any issues arising
- Help students make connections between theory and practice (e.g. what are the implications for teaching?)
- Student tracking ... do this regularly and follow-up with students (by phone initially) ... we expect them to participate and engage in their learning and they need to know that we notice if they don't
- The faculty uses APA referencing. See the library guide for APA referencing information (this is important when marking student work)
- Know how to access IT support – for yourself and your students.
- Talk with Tanya Ferres, the Student Advisor, about her role and what she does to support students.
- Be aware of CALT and the services they provide to students and staff and how students access that support.
- Try not to fall into the trap of being online ALL the time
- Set specific times of availability and stick to them.

### **Section Three: Online tutoring**

Peter has identified some critical issues for tutors and offers sound advice for those new to online tutoring.

#### **Online Tutoring – Peter Osborne**

*Following comments earlier about the development of a discussion paper for tutors regarding effective on line tutoring, I make the following observations about my practice. I guess I have just adhered to some basic teaching principles as I have explored on line tutoring. ie building a respectful relationship by acknowledging and responding to as many posts as possible, (I believe it is vital that students know that a tutor is engaging actively with the discussion posts), challenging the students' thinking with critical questions, modelling myself as a learner by posting my own learning from the readings and discussions.*

*I now have a simple system for working through the posts so I don't waste too much time reading without a response and make a judgment as to when discussion posts are self-sustaining from student input and when some tutor input is needed. The discussions should be intellectually rigorous, but engaging... a fine line online! I modelled responses to activities by completing the activities myself as if I were a student (as I was really!).*

*I endeavoured to respond to all students on a regular cycle to develop a professional relationship by showing an interest, providing positive feedback and asking critical questions. I developed a spread sheet so that I could track to whom I had responded, although I sometimes forgot to fill it out! This way I tried to always respond to a student who specifically responded to one of my questions.*

*When I got swamped by responses, usually because I was away or marking, I quickly scanned student responses for key issues and summarised them in my own response. With this response, naming students also provided positive feedback and I would generate some key questions to stimulate further debate.*

*Where discussions had a life of their own, I would monitor but not usually respond. I would, however, occasionally provide a critical question to re-introduce some intellectual rigour if the discussion was meandering.*

**Peter Osborne**

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