JISC

The Joint Information Systems Committee

Tutoring and Mentoring Online

This paper covers a number of issues that tutors will need to be aware of in order to be an effective online tutor and mentor.

What are the Implications of e-Learning?

The advent of e-learning has meant that learning providers have had to think about change; change in the way they deliver to, track, and most importantly, support learners. If an e-learning culture does not already exist then it will be necessary to develop one. Learners can access learning 'anywhere, any place, any time'. The learning is provided in small chunks just as they are required enabling skills to be built bit by bit, sometimes referred to as "just in time – just what's required learning".

Online learning must be based on the needs of the learner and not on what is available.

We will need to keep in mind that as we change from the culture of 'needing to know' to one of 'wanting to learn' that education today cannot just be fixed with technology. Online or e-learning must be seen as another tool in the box of the tutor/lecturer for it to be successful.

Know Your Environment

It is important to be aware of differences in terminology, for example some terms are used within various Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to mean different things. In some instances these are comparable to generic Web terms. Students may or may not be familiar with different terms and so these will need to be defined and explained.

Tutors' Online Knowledge and Experience

Tutors who are not confident with computers and technology may well find the prospect of online tutoring and mentoring quite frightening, but with correct and relevant training it will eventually prove to be an efficient and rewarding experience. Tutors will need to provide a climate in which people can take responsibility for their own learning, guiding learners through the course so that they complete it successfully. In short they will need to become a facilitator of learning.

Tutor Skills

It will not matter whether you decide to call yourself an online tutor, e-trainer, learning advisor or online learning consultant, the skills required will be the same. Tutors will need to be engaging, reassuring, welcoming and supporting.

Communication

The most important issue will be that of communication and the use of email, discussion groups, conferencing (written, audio and video), telephone and email support. In many situations (but not necessarily all) face to face teaching and support will still be required. All areas of communication are covered within a report on the development of online skills which can be found on the MLE Web site (see URL below). Hints and tips are given in some areas for effective use of communication.

enabling change

http://www.jisc.ac.uk/mle/

Administrative Organisational Skills

Keeping track of student progress, assessment results and student feedback are all a vital part of the tutor's responsibilities. Having a set time for online support, conferencing and research are all good organisational skills. Online teaching requires no less discipline than traditional classroom teaching.

Planning

In addition to traditional preparation, the cornerstone of lecturing, tutors will need to prepare and design their materials for use online.

Other Key Areas for Tutors are:

- Customer service skills
- Evaluation skills
- Support of students
- Identifying needs
- Tutor and program effectiveness
- Monitoring and assessment skills
- Ability to facilitate individuals and group learning
- Mentoring and coaching skills
- Subject knowledge/working knowledge
- Brokering skills (for further advice and guidance)
- Learning needs identification

This list might, at first glance, appear daunting. However, it is important to remember that the skills you have now as a tutor are in the main the same ones as those required for an electronic environment but adapted accordingly. Virtual Learning Environments are more controlled and less adaptable to the individual and additional skills for online tutoring and mentoring may need to be learnt. All tutors will need to be proactive and careful not to lose sight of the importance to 'log on' and provide support at given times. Students who cannot be seen are no less important than the students sitting in the class in front of you.

At times it may feel as though you are presenting information to a large black hole. It is important to remember that communication in the electronic environment is very often asynchronous, that is, the students are not interacting with you in real time but will choose to enter the environment when time allows. Learning to be an effective online tutor takes time

About the Author

Jayne Bacon is ILT Development Manager at the Colchester Institute. A qualified tutor with a BEd, Jayne has worked in the computer field for many years, including specialist work as a tutor to adults with acquired brain injury.

Jayne has responsibilities for development of online learning within the college. She spent two years as senior staff IT trainer within the college developing courses to build confidence with technology among staff. Jayne has also written courses for delivery within a variety of different VLEs, as well as giving online tutor support for a variety of online courses both within specialised delivery environments and also with computer based training (CBT).

Contact: jayne.bacon@colch-inst.ac.uk

and patience and expectations on both sides need to be carefully managed. One way of gaining the skills is to experience the e-learning environment. Initially, tutors must be prepared for some frustration. However, once online tutoring skills are acquired it can be just as rewarding as any other teaching.

Many tasks will be quicker, better reporting can be achieved and the tutor role will be just as important and rewarding as it has always been.

Further Information

Tutoring/Mentoring Online: How to be an online tutor. Julia Duggleby, Gower, 2000.
ISBN 0566082470

The following are useful sources of information:
http://www.onlinelearning.net/OLE/
http://www.lifelonglearning.ac.uk/
http://www.online-trainer.com/compets/tutor.htm
http://emoderators.com/
http://www.sheffcol.ac.uk/lettol/

"JISC-funded initiatives promote best practice and the use of agreed standards"