
TUTORING AT A DISTANCE, ONLINE TUTORING AND TUTORING IN SECOND LIFE

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Abstract

Research into tutoring at a distance has a fairly long history and the functions of tutors in distance education institutions are well understood. Over the past 20 years research into online tutoring has advanced significantly as such institutions have 'gone electronic': in this paper we cite published research from the UK Open University. Recently, blogs, wikis and podcasts have arrived to supplement established systems like email, virtual learning environments (VLEs, such as Blackboard) and computer (web) conferencing. Very little research has been published so far, however, on tutoring distant students in three-dimensional multi-user virtual environments (3-D MUVES). Distance educators may want to ask whether the best practices from tutoring at a distance and online tutoring can be transferred to these environments, which do *not* resemble VLEs. To clarify what may or may not be feasible in Second Life, the prime example of a 3-D MUVE, this paper will include a live onscreen elucidation through avatars, on a Second Life island created by the Beyond Distance Research Alliance at the University of Leicester. Conference attendees will witness in Second Life examples of what can be done by way of meeting students' needs for tutoring, and will discuss the opportunities and challenges inherent in asking students and tutors to meet in such an environment.

Tutoring at a distance

In distance education, tutors grade students' work and comment on it to them; they may also advise students on which courses to study and help them with study problems. In traditional correspondence courses, offered for many decades in many countries, students sent their assignments to tutors and waited for the marks. In the worst cases, students did not even know who marked their assignments: it was very impersonal. In the best cases, students also met their tutors face-to-face, if infrequently.

For example, the Open University's students in the early 1970s could meet their tutors in face-to-face sessions. These were for diagnostic and remedial purposes rather than for substantial exposition by the tutors. Students often sought guidance from their tutors on writing their assignments, which they sent to their tutors by mail for grading, detailed comment and return by mail, as in a correspondence course. Tutors were expected, through these comments and the tutorials, to help students to build up their scholarship in the course content. Tutors helped students not to drop out.

In summarising OU research on tutoring at a distance, Hawkrige (1978) reported that OU students made many disparate demands on their tutors. They said that they valued the correspondence tutoring more highly than face-to-face tutorials, but the OU has always made assignments essential and tutorials optional. Northedge and Durbridge (1978) pointed out that tutorials were the only means whereby OU students could fleetingly confront the academic world in person. Tutorials carried with them functions that in the campus university are normally spread across lectures, laboratory sessions, chats in the coffee bar, chance meetings in the library and so on. Nevertheless, almost all tutoring was at a distance, not face-to-face.

Tutoring online

As early as 1987, a few OU courses introduced computer conferencing for students and tutors who were already online. From 1993, the OU began to go electronic while retaining its reputation for successful supported self-study based on print and other materials delivered by mail to students learning in their own homes. Much OU tutoring went online by using computer conferencing and email, plus an online system for students to submit (and tutors to grade, comment on and return) their assignments. With even fewer face-to-face tutorials per course, could the tutors' support to students be maintained? The research evidence is mixed.

Online tutoring was the only form available to OU students taking the Master's in Open and Distance Education programme from 1997 onwards. In the printed study guides were student activities. Students were asked initially to post their answers in the online workbook, in the conferencing system. The educational rationale was that students would benefit from seeing each other's answers and being able to discuss them with their tutor. The first course began well enough but soon there were far too many messages to read. Contributions from students dropped; they debated issues less and less. The online café, which invited students to 'drop in' informally, was better sustained, with shorter friendly messages, but few of these related to academic issues. The most successful computer conferences were those linked to assignments. Students participated in all of these, some more enthusiastically and fruitfully than others. Students used e-mail to get direct advice from their tutors on assignments and administrative problems. Tutors used e-mail to contact students who wrote little in the workbook or who fell behind schedule. E-mails were important in supporting students (Hawkrige, Morgan and Jelfs, 1997).

In a study of a technology and society course with over 1000 students, Kear and Heap (1999) observed both positive and negative consequences of online tutoring. In an advanced mathematics course Thomas and Carswell (2000) tried the 'snowball' online tutorial, in which students start off in pairs and move by stages to group discussion under a tutor. Goodfellow (2001) looked at the problems of assessing students' participation in groups, while Goodfellow et al. (2001) discussed the cultural and linguistic barriers that OU students meet in global online learning.

To switch to online tutoring in its 25,000-student Business School, the OU needed to train *online* hundreds of tutors, nation-wide and abroad. They all had to become online e-moderators for computer conferences with their students. Through action research, Salmon (2000) developed a five-stage e-moderating model, grounded in constructivist learning theory as well as practical experience. Just as the best face-to-face tutors aim at meeting, motivating and getting to know their students, so she emphasises access and motivation in Stage 1 and online socialisation in Stage 2. Wise face-to-face tutors advise students on sources and how to be selective; similarly, Salmon's Stage 3 calls for online exchange and discussion (students-to-students, tutor-to-students, students-to-tutor) to build up critical selectivity. Face-to-face tutors meet with groups to explore concepts and issues; online, Stage 4 calls for knowledge construction. Face-to-face tutors aim to help students to learn how to learn, how to understand over-arching theory, how to challenge ideas and construct meaning for themselves; Salmon's Stage 5 provides for the same kinds of learning online. Not all online students will reach Stages 4 and 5. The same is true in face-to-face groups. Some students need more pushing than others, whether face-to-face or online. Some tutors/e-moderators are better at their job than others (some are better trained than others, too). Salmon (2002) asserted that essential to online tutoring are what she called e-tivities, reflective learning activities undertaken by students individually and in groups at each of the five stages. She offered ample guidance on how to create them.

Salmon's is not the only model: for others see McCreay (1990), Berge and Collins, (1995) and Mason (1998). However, Cox et al. (2000) regarded these models as lacking the flexibility and imagination needed to exploit opportunities created by online discourse. In evaluating a 700-student OU course, T171 *You, Your Computer and the Net*, taught almost entirely online, they found that the tutors generally failed to stimulate or facilitate online discussion. Elsewhere, McConnell (2006) drew on evidence from his research to develop theory and practice regarding e-learning groups and communities. Macdonald's (2008) research in the OU in Scotland yielded guidelines for good practice in online asynchronous and synchronous tutoring.

The experiences of OU students taking U213 *International Development* were compared by Price et al. (2007) in three studies when tutorial support was provided conventionally (using limited face-to-face sessions with some contact by telephone and email) or online (using computer-mediated conferencing and email).

"Study 1 was a quantitative survey using an adapted version of the Course Experience Questionnaire and the Revised Approaches to Studying Inventory. Study 2 was another quantitative survey using the Academic Engagement Form. Study 3 was an interview-based examination of the students' conceptions of tutoring and tuition. In all three studies, the students receiving online tutoring reported poorer experiences than those receiving face-to-face tutoring. Study 3 showed that tutoring was seen not only as an academic activity but also as a highly valued pastoral activity. To make online tutoring successful both tutors and students need training in how to communicate online in the absence of paralinguistic cues." Price et al. (2007, p1)

Price et al. (2007) acknowledged that U213 might have posed particular problems for tutors and students because it was a multidisciplinary course. In a further study, using the same instruments, Richardson (2009) found no significant differences on two humanities courses between students who received online tutoring and those who received face-to-face tutoring, either in their perceptions of the academic quality of their courses or in the approaches to studying that they adopted on those courses. The differences obtained by Price et al. (2007) did not appear to be peculiar to multidisciplinary courses. Richardson concluded that course designers could be confident about introducing online forms of tutorial support into distance education, provided that tutors and students receive appropriate training and support.

Ideally, the technology enables online tutors to weave together conference conversations, Web pages and even emails. They do so by acknowledging contributions, synthesising and summarising, drawing threads together, watching for and correcting conversational 'drift', spotting good ideas, opening up new avenues for development, identifying holes in arguments (and patching them), separating opinions from facts, clarifying areas of agreement and disagreement, encouraging further exploration, pointing to valuable sources, promoting selectivity and building patterns.

Tutoring in Second Life

Social networking, with Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook, YouTube and Flickr, offers tutors and students huge opportunities to reach and learn from each other. Of the three-dimensional multi-user virtual environments (3-D MUVEs), Second Life (SL), accessible via the Internet since 2003, is by far the most widely used. Keegan (2008) said SL was the third most popular social software application in the UK, after Facebook and YouTube, in time spent using it. Worldwide, well over 10 million people have registered as 'residents' in SL. At any one moment, 30-50,000 of their avatars (their virtual representations) are likely to be active in-world.

SL is a social environment, not a game, although avatars can be very playful. Generally, users are *not* expected by the software to meet objectives, engage in battles or undertake quests and tasks as in most virtual games. SL contains no goal-driven rules: it was not designed with tutoring in mind, but avatars in SL can do more or less whatever they like, except visit areas where owners of the virtual land restrict access.

SL is starting to command attention in higher education. We think this may be because it offers opportunities for immersive learning. Seely Brown (2008) suggested that immersion was one of the principal ways in which the learning landscape could be transformed. For example, he said, everyone learns a home language through immersion – and desires to learn it. Virtual worlds in three dimensions may now enable people to learn by immersion in many fields, along with other learners: they can learn from and with them, in virtual space.

Academics seem to be using SL for educational purposes such as virtual laboratories and field trips, problem-based learning, group discussions and design teamwork. For recent examples, see *ALT-J*, 16, 3, 2008, and the *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 40, 3, 2009. Such initiatives try to take into account students' preferences and habits, and, by exploiting aspects of immersion, aim to enrich their learning.

Is SL an ideal setting for distance education, and perhaps for tutoring students? At the University of Leicester the Beyond Distance Research Alliance has built an island in SL for its Media Zoo (Wheeler, 2009). The Zoo [which will be shown online] offers a setting for communities of inquiry (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). Avatars can create and enjoy the three forms of presence in such communities: social, cognitive and teaching presence [to be demonstrated online]. Salmon's (2000, 2002) online tutoring model and e-tivities can be adapted. Students' avatars and their avatar tutors can move through the five stages, engaging in SL-tivities as they go. The SL-tivities can be created by the avatars, or placed on the island ready for use [to be demonstrated online].

Needless to say, the avatars may represent tutors and learners from any part of the globe. A distance education institution can limit access to its island (or a part of it) to those registered for a particular tutorial, and doing so eases problems of identity and trust that crop up if complete strangers appear out of the blue, so to speak. As tutors get to know their students' avatars, they may find their own identity and authority challenged, not least because avatars tend to be on equal terms in SL, more so than their owner-users are in real life (RL). Tutors who try to replicate their RL 'full-frontal' teaching style in SL may find themselves at a considerable disadvantage, since presentations can take up to four times as long in SL and student avatars may wander off. If the tutors' avatars are tutoring synchronously worldwide, time differences are a problem: asynchronous sessions have to 'wait' for students' avatars on other continents to contribute.

These and other issues are summarised in Table 1.

Despite such challenges, SL offers tutors and students considerable advantages, as Table 1 illustrates. For example, tutors can create in SL artefacts or objects that simply do not exist or are inaccessible in RL, to use for illustration or as the spark for a discussion among avatars [to be demonstrated online].

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of tutoring in SL

Advantages	Disadvantages
SL helps to break down barriers between students and tutors. Students feel more among equals and more comfortable in collaborating in group activities.	Tutors in SL may find their identity (and authority) challenged if their avatars cannot cope well with the SL environment.
Tutors can send advance information to students via SL, to supplement other materials provided both online in a VLE and in face-to-face sessions, with the result that activities taking place in SL are more focussed, therefore more challenging!	Tutors in SL find it too time consuming if they try to 'replicate' some real-world teaching styles. Presentations in SL, for example, take four times as long as they would in RL.
Tutors can create artefacts or objects in SL that simply do not exist or are inaccessible, to use as the spark for a discussion. They can expect a steeper learning curve of their students and provide in SL opportunities for reflection, discussion and development of new ideas.	Tutors in SL need to be creative or have help in becoming creative in realising SL's potential. E-tivities suitable for SL (SL-tivities) may be very different from those deployed in online tutorials in RL.
Tutors in SL find that their students have time to reflect on topics before contributing and are more likely to say something meaningful rather than just "I agree" as they might in an online discussion board.	As with all 'real-time' interactions, time-zones can become a problem for tutors and students.
For tutors in SL, students' perception of them as 'cutting-edge' tutors gives them more weight to stretch and challenge their students in ways that would be more difficult using traditional technologies.	Students (and tutors) unfamiliar with SL may need time to get used to and feel comfortable in its ambience, or may be distracted by other parts of SL, some of which are bizarre!
Tutors and students in SL have added accessibility in terms of the language used. Chat logs (and possibly audio recordings) of the interactions build confidence in those students who may have English as a second language – plus there are plenty of opportunities to try out and practice languages away from the learning scenarios.	Older students who are less 'tech-savvy' may take longer to see the possibilities of SL than their younger counterparts.

At the Beyond Distance Research Alliance we are at the beginning of an exciting period of trials and research into tutoring in Second Life. We look forward to reporting developments at future EDEN conferences.

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