
ACHIEVING STUDENT CENTRED FACILITATION IN ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS TUTORIALS

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Summary

The advent of digital capabilities in synchronous communication technologies has enabled the UKOU STEM faculty to move much of its tutorial provision from a face-to-face setting online. Direct observation, in this study, of around 70 hours of online tuition has revealed that the ethos of student centred facilitation, which previously characterised most OU face to face tutorial provision has now largely been lost. Despite the affordances of interactive tools within the platform used for tuition (Adobe Connect), staff delivering synchronous online tuition have largely adopted a didactic approach with a focus on *content to cover*. Interviews with staff in this study reveal significant frustration that students are not more active participants within tutorials and describe how their best efforts to foster staff to student and student-to-student interactions frequently meet with failure. Student satisfaction with tuition experiences, however, is high with most students describing tutorials as highly valuable to their learning. In addition, data analytics reveal that many students make significant use of recordings of synchronous tutorials and frequently, by choice, rarely attend sessions live. Student surveys and in-depth interviews with students and staff reveal a lack of shared understanding of the role of tutorial provision within our distance-learning context.

Introduction

The majority of UKOU modules in Life and Health Sciences use online delivery for synchronous tuition. This includes tutorials, led by an Associate Lecturer (AL or tutor) to different sized groups of students. The purpose of this tuition is to complement the supplied and very comprehensive distance learning materials (a *flipped classroom* approach), providing an opportunity for students to work in a group setting with a tutor to develop an understanding of previously studied material.

Within the Open University supported open learning model, tutorials have long served to reduce the sense of isolation felt by distance learners and provide opportunities for active learning with student peers, guided by ALs. In a distance learning setting these synchronous events provide rare opportunities for discussion, group activities and collaborative work. Since the UKOU's inception, ALs have been encouraged to offer student centred sessions, placing the learner and their needs at the heart of the tutorial agenda and choosing activities that promote active learning—the very essence of the social constructivist approach seeking to

promote deep learning. Until recently all tutorials were run as face to face events in study centre venues, relatively local to the student populations they served.

Within the last 10 years, the advent of digital capabilities in synchronous communication technologies has enabled the UKOU STEM faculty to move much of its tutorial provision online. In Life and Health sciences all tutorials now take place in online rooms (formally an OU licensed version of Blackboard Collaborate, more recently, Adobe Connect). The current model of tuition favoured by the university organises tuition at different scales. The smallest scale encompasses sessions at the level of the tutor group (around 20 students) in sessions with their *own*, personal module tutor. Tutorials are also offered at a larger scale to several tutor groups' students simultaneously or even at the level of the module where potentially as many as 200 or more students may attend the session. These sessions are led by a team of ALs, some not personally known to the students. Attendance at tutorials is not mandatory and for many, tuition is seen very much as an adjunct to the study of the core distance learning materials. On moving tuition online there was an initial expectation that attendance would improve since the barriers to attendance were reduced (travel, transport costs, caring duties). This has proved not to be the case with many students citing difficulties around tutorial attendance including other commitments clashing with scheduling, or simply not having sufficient time to attend. For accessibility reasons, most OU tutorials are recorded so all students can access a play back of the session when convenient if they choose to. This could be seen as a significant advantage of online tuition; as potentially more students can benefit than with the traditional classroom based tuition model.

Training for ALs sought to encourage skill development around the use of the interactive tools offered in the online room, including the tutor and student use of the microphone and a chat box, break out rooms for group work, an interactive whiteboard with drawing tools, a quiz tool and a polling tool to answer questions as a group. The use of these interactive tools was expected to lead to fully student centred tutorials with ALs acting as facilitators and not lecturers.

Many stakeholders feel however, that it has proved difficult to replicate the flavour of the former face-to-face OU tutorials online. Frequent barriers to successful online tuition experiences are connected to access, hardware and software. Both ALs and students have expressed a certain lack of confidence in the online learning environment, describing difficulties with sound quality and the general stability of the platform.

The advent of recorded online tutorials affords a method by which students may *attend* tuition events asynchronously (learning analytic tracking system records tutorial viewings). The issue for the institution here is complex. If students can choose to either *download* a tutorial experience or to attend synchronously then how should the session be designed? Is it possible to design a tutorial that does actually meet the needs of both sets of learners (balancing the amount of interactive, student centred content for the students attending live, while still ensuring students watching the recording have something comprehensible to view) and in attempting to do so are we unintentionally subverting the ethos of the tutorial as the

vehicle for the social, the reflective and experiential aspects of the learning model (Conole, 2004)?

By the inception of this study, online tuition was well established as the sole mode of tuition delivery in Life and Health Science modules and ALs had had time to develop skills within the online environment. It was therefore prudent to investigate and explore, very comprehensively, what ALs and students actually did in online tutorials and to discover if this matches expectations of the traditional student centred style. We were also interested in AL's perceptions of their tuition delivery role and whether this matched our students' perceptions of what constituted good tuition.

Methodology

Phase 1

Recordings of OU live tutorials across four level 2, health science modules were observed using a tutorial checklist (appendix y). The tutorial checklist contained a blend of semi-quantitative criteria for scoring, and qualitative free text comment boxes. The checklist was devised to assess the presentation style of the tutor, the pedagogic content of the tutorial and the OU Live tools used by the tutor to promote interactivity and student engagement within the tutorial. The checklist was tested in a pilot phase with all researchers scoring the same 5 tutorial recordings to ensure the checklist covered all relevant aspects required and the researchers were scoring the criteria in a consistent manner.

A total of 74 tutorials recordings were scored using the checklist across the four modules; S294 (n = 20 observations), S295 (n = 16 observations), SXHL288 (n = 18 observations) and SK277 (n = 20 observations).

The semi-quantitative data was analysed in Excel.

Phase 2

Students on all four target modules were invited to participate in an online survey. The survey consisted of a combination of closed questions, with responses graded on a Likert scale where appropriate, the results of which formed Phase 1 of this study. To provide an opportunity for students to elaborate upon their responses to the closed questions, a number of open questions were included and these were analysed using NVivo 11, as part of Phase 3. All closed questions are included in the Appendix.

Phase 3

Of the 29 students responding to the survey, 3 individuals were followed up with a semi-structured interview. Subsequently a further two students were identified (who had undertaken one or more of our target modules) and were interviewed.

The interviews sought to further explore students' perceptions and attitudes towards the synchronous, online tuition they had received. Our interview sample consisted of 2 women and 3 men, with one of the women based overseas in a different time zone.

In addition, 6 Associate Lecturers (5 women and 1 man) drawn from cohort of ALs tutoring the level 2 modules under examination, were interviewed with an analogous set of interview questions.

All interviews were transcribed and together with the text from the open-ended questions within the survey were coded in NVivo 11.

Findings Phase 1

From our observations we have a number of important findings. Our key Phase 1 finding is highlighted in Figure 1.

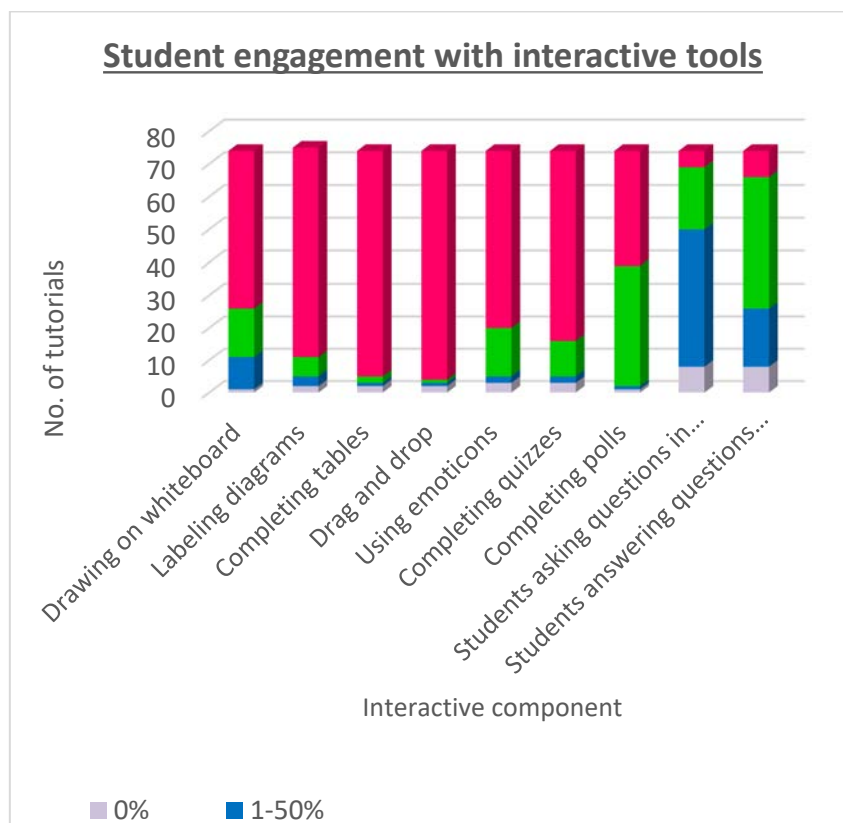


Figure 1. Graph to show use of interactive tools during tutorials

Figure 1 shows that in all tutorials a wide range of interactive tools were available but infrequently used by the tutor (pink bars). When offered use of the interactive tools, the majority of students engaged, as indicated by the green bars. In particular students favoured use of interactive tools that offered anonymity such as polling and drawing on the whiteboard.

Findings Phase 2

We have a number of important findings here. One key Phase 2 finding is highlighted in Figure 2 which illustrates students' perceptions of valuable aspects of tutorials.

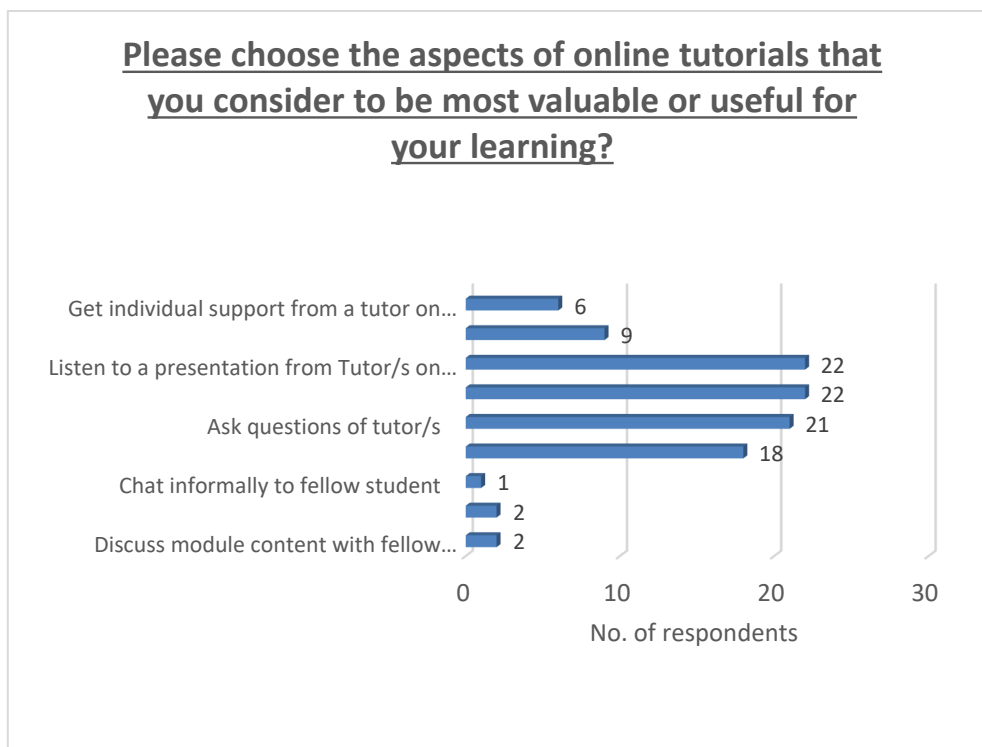


Figure 2. Graph to show student responses to survey question “Please choose aspects of online tutorials you consider to be the most valuable for your learning”

Figure 2 shows that students value listening to a tutor led presentation, the opportunity to check their understanding and the opportunity to ask questions of their tutor. Discussion (whether formal or informal) and activities with other students are not highly valued.

Findings Phase 3

The open ended survey data and the semi-structured interviews provided a wealth of data from students and ALs.

Most students surveyed or interviewed were very clear on the value of recording tutorials, for reasons of convenience but also to supplement revision and examination preparation. ALs however felt very strongly that the act of recording a tutorial negatively impacts on students’ willingness to engage actively in the tutorial, particularly manifest in a reluctance to use the microphone to speak.

“they will be chatting away quite nicely and then as soon as we start recording everything goes into the chatbox”

For the students interviewed this change in student behaviour within the tutorial was not seen as an important consideration given that the value of the recording to the students outweighed any negative effects experienced during the session.

The student view of interactivity with an online tutorial presented some interesting contrasts with that of ALs. The students reported that the tutorials they attended had been quite interactive and mentioned their tutors using polling questions and encouraged them to ask

and answer questions via the chat box but several did refer to their sessions as ‘lectures’, for example

“There are sections of it which are interactive but it does feel more like this is a lecture, you need to pay serious attention and take notes.”

Other students commented that the interaction could be stilted and one way, for example

“I didn’t get involved.....The tutor would try really hard on every module, you know, to put a tick or draw a line on screen, or something like that. Hardly anyone would do it.”

Tutors felt they were doing as much as they could, within the online environment, to make sessions more interactive but they were aware of limited success and felt under pressure, albeit reluctantly, to deliver a content focussed session, perhaps feeling that this is what was expected and valued by the students, for example,

“I think students want to sit back and be taught and learn by listening without realising that they need to be interacting and thinking.”

All students questioned were aware that hearing students’ voices within a tutorial was a rare occurrence and several commented that they had experienced use of break out rooms but only very rarely, for example

“The chat freezes in breakout rooms, I really don’t like them.”

Tutors expressed similarly misgivings about use of breakout rooms, expressing frustration that students do not value group work and therefore will not engage in breakout rooms. They also expressed views around poor student attendance, stressing that low attendance make planning meaningful group work doubly difficult. Students, too were concerned about attendance, for example,

“Tutorials were only 3 or 4 people attended were thin and undynamic (sic).”

Interestingly some student voices were asking for more student centred tutorials. Comments such as

“I would prefer tutorials to be a discussion between myself, the tutor and other students about current parts of the module”

were rare, with most students valuing a good presentation of module content above anything else.

Conclusions

It is apparent from this detailed examination of the tutorials in Life and Health Sciences that, for the most part online tuition is not student centred. Online tutorials, regardless of scale in

terms of number of student participants, are largely didactic events and can be characterised as interactive lectures, with a limited use of the largely anonymous tools within the online room (polling and quizzing). This contrasts starkly with the view of ALs surveyed here, suggesting that they would prefer to facilitate sessions where students were much more active as learners and which they feel would be of greater benefit to their students. Interestingly we found student satisfaction with tutorial provision is high, although uptake is poor. This may suggest a mismatch between the expectations of the institution, its ALs and its students on the purposes of synchronous tuition and the learning benefits participation may bring. Indeed, our study illustrates a clear relationship between what our students suggest they value from tuition (a clear presentation of module content) with the type of tutorial that is ultimately delivered by their tutor – this suggest that student behaviour and the limited amount of student engagement within the tutorial is driving, to a large extent, the tutors' teaching style, with ALs retreating to a minimally interactive delivery style which is tolerated by the students.

There is a real focus in sessions on *coverage* with ALs striving to transmit information in well digested chunks on every aspect of the module content and the assessment. Furthermore, tutors report they are often distracted by the need to provide a coherent recording of the session. This, despite the fact, that the student is already in possession of expensively and expertly crafted distance-learning materials covering the same topics.

Communication is most likely to be via the chat box allowing students to answer and ask questions and only in a very few cases is there even any assumption that students will speak. Opportunities for group work are rare. In addition, perceived and real student reluctance is a factor here, with tutors fearful of 'forcing' students to participate in the online setting.

Extensive student use of recordings of sessions has shown us that there is an appetite for purely passive consumption of lecture type material which many students value. Should we be worried that most of our students are passive consumers of tutorials and what about the students who are looking for more from tutorials but who are disappointed?

Our detailed focus on the realities of tutorial provision in this area of our curriculum therefore suggests a new approach to tutorial provision in the UKOU setting is required; one which offers a greater variety of diversity of tutorial experiences in order to better match the variety of expectations of our students.

References

1. Conole, G., Dyke, M., Oliver, M., & Seale, J. (2004). Mapping pedagogy and tools for effective learning design. *Computers & Education*, 43(1-2), 17–33.