

Online Education – Advice to Tutors

[This is an edited version of a short report originally submitted for the Engaging Learners in Online Discussions (ELOD) OUA unit. The proposed scenario was, as coordinator, to provide advice to tutors of a unit delivered online.]

I will focus here on advice for a unit with a significant asynchronous component and only a few, if any, live remote sessions.

My first piece of advice is to take advantage of the permanence of the material. Not only can we use templates for text-based discussion forum topics but we can also access historical posts. As a coordinator, I would provide detailed tutor guidelines and recommend they be personalised. As part of this recommendation, I would also encourage tutors to organise their material in folders that parallel the structure of the components of the units. In a way, this advice involves providing an introduction to the course material. It emphasises the need to know the subject. Not only can the overall unit material be easily re-used, so can the specific tutorial posts.

My second piece of advice is to take full advantage of the quality of interaction that electronic communication supports. I refer here to the type of authenticity, responsiveness, and precision we can apply in online discussion forums. We then need to develop online discussion techniques involving a clarity of engagement that provokes differed responses; timeliness that is not rushed; attention to detail that takes into account student sensitivities. Electronic discussions also require our comments to be crafted almost like lecture material. It should be concise, precise, and properly edited. As a specific piece of advice in this regard, I would recommend drafting forum entries, responses, and comments in a word-processor prior to posting. In a way, this advice proposes integration with techniques tutors are already familiar with. It therefore allows me to emphasise continuity with the tutor's experience.

My third piece of advice is to take full advantage of the flexibility of online tutoring. We can set aside dedicated times for the various components of the tutorial work; selecting the best possible times to do justice to the material. Generally we cannot postpone our responses for more than a working day but we can plan our work to avoid unnecessary interruptions. It gives us the opportunity to focus on details in a way that face-to-face teaching does not allow. In a way, this advice proposes an improvement in the efficiency of tutoring. I would then emphasise the opportunity to alleviate some of the frustrations associated with the immediacy of face-to-face challenges.

And then I would advise new tutors to consider some formal training in online delivery. For instance, the ELOD unit helped me identify a number of critical issues. One of these is not directly related to the delivery of tutorials but to a more general approach to online teaching: opportunities to develop new frameworks for quality teaching. In that regard, the Tutorial Support Management model is an example of how online education can be a positive environment. I would advise new tutors to become aware of such models and to consider that the dynamic nature of online delivery is the starting point to provide a supportive environment for the students, one based on competency in the subject matter, dedication to precision in delivery, awareness of individual student needs, and a flexible approach to sharing the learning experience. I suppose I refer to improving choices.