“E-quality” of synchronous tutorials online in supporting distance students’ learning journeys

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The research

Students tend to find learning challenging in a large content-driven first year course. Traditional face-to-face tutorials offer an additional form of learning opportunities via students’ interactions and discussions within small group settings building informal encounters. Frequent contact and technology-enhanced interactive lectures are used to give opportunities for students to interact openly with educators and their immediate peers. However, it is difficult to implement such goals with distance learning. Advanced developments in technology and online tutorials can provide “e-quality” and channels which offer similar learning experiences to distance students\(^1\). A current first year course provides no less than four scheduled online interactive tutorials giving opportunities for communication with students in real-time, streamed online during the 2nd, 5th, 8th and 11th weeks of the semester. The designed research will investigate students’ and tutors’ perspectives of the “e-quality” of usefulness of these tutorials.

The objectives:

- to explore the effectiveness and practical issues of online tutorial offerings for distance students’ learning journeys from an educators’ perspective
- to explore the effectiveness and practical issues of online tutorial offerings for distance students’ learning journeys from the learners’ perspective

Why this topic is important

Online learning has been increasingly popular in training and higher education teaching worldwide. The effectiveness of delivery of such courses has been frequently explored. Traditionally, tutorials have been well received. High quality tutorials increase academic success and students’ retention, positively enhancing students’ learning journeys in the higher education sector. While traditional internal delivery remains common, more online distance courses are frequently offered for all learners and giving extra assistance to more non-traditional students.

Students enrolled in distance learning often report feeling isolated and disconnected. They are encouraged to post discussions on both academic and social forums, using them as asynchronous technologies. However, perceived non-participation remains a concern for online learning\(^2\), and imbalance of participation can create high levels of frustration among specific learners\(^3\). Forums may provide less assistance when compared to other forms of synchronous technologies, such as chat rooms, video-conference systems, or instant messaging tools\(^4\). Online learning support not only provides student-instructor interaction, but also allows interaction among peer-to-peer, student to content, in three dimensions\(^5\). Continued support to distance students academically is essential, particularly to first year students. For whom it can appear to be an overwhelming experience. It is anticipated to design online tutorials to be as effective as traditional face-to-face sessions for students, where research has suggested possible barriers may exist for such students. However, so far
little published literature measures the effectiveness of online tutorials to teach distance students from either or both learners’ and educators’ perspectives.

**How the session will be run?**

The first 5-10 minutes will introduce the current practice in online tutoring, describing its usage by distance students, followed by an outline of the research plan. The research will have two standpoints: a survey at the start of the semester to ask students’ views about online tutorials; then a final survey at the close of the semester to review online tutorials from students’ perspective. Possible in-person interviews from willing students will then take place.

Then, small groups with 4 to 5 members each will be formed. Each group will draw on their members’ personal experiences to provide suggestions for key improvements to online tutorials. This activity might take about 10-15 minutes.

We then “flip the coin”, and ask each group to consider themselves to be at the receiving end of online tutorials, and suggest what factors are most for improving effectiveness. This activity might take a further 10-15 minutes.

Calling the groups back together, each will report back, identifying useful factors for effective online tutorials from both educators and students’ perspectives. This may transition into a general discussion about how to improve online tutorial supporting distance learning. Time taken may be 10-15 minutes.

The session will end by effectively summarizing the discussions, followed by concluding comments, which may give rise to further additional points of interest, prior to departure.

**References**

2. Anderson B, Simpson M. Group and class contexts fro learning and support online: Learning and affective support online in small group and class contexts. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 2004;5(3).
3. Capdeferre N, Romero M. Are Online Learners Frustrated with Collaborative Learning Experiences ? *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13, 26-44.