

Tutoring Online: Increasing Effectiveness with Best Practices

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Is tutoring online more than just email? Two yearlong studies explored tutoring online in two different modes. One, from Atlantic Community College in New Jersey, looked at asynchronous (not real time) tutoring online using a discussion board. The other, at Pima Community College in Arizona, used synchronous (real time) online software. The combination of these two studies suggests best practices for this new environment.

In using technology to provide tutoring online, new studies are suggesting that the important element may be the definition of the process of tutoring in the new cyberspace environment more than the choice of the technology. As John Couch, Apple's vice president of education suggests, "teachers tend to look at technology as a tool, whereas students look at technology as an environment" (Fryer, 2003). Although electronic tools are needed to deliver tutoring online, a definition of the online process and its best practices may be needed first in order to help select the appropriate technology or, in the words of Frank Christ (2002), put "pedagogy before technology." This article will review the evolution of online tutoring and discuss the best practices suggested by the studies.

THE BEGINNING

Historically, online tutoring began with email. In this format, a student sent a question to the tutor with the expectation that the return email would contain "the answer." Instead, what happened was a disconnection: The tutor, being a good guide, sent back a Socratic answer with more questioning prompts; the student, expecting "the answer," became frustrated. Although the student may expect a give and take interaction in a face-to-face tutoring session, the email format suggested to the student that the question should be

answered with a direct answer. This illustration is an example of using technology without fully developing the concept of tutoring in the online environment.

THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE RESOURCES

Although initial tutoring online models begin with email, there has been an emergence of new models as new tools became available, both in asynchronous and synchronous formats. The following models are presented in the context of the specific tool used, for example, Blackboard or NetTutor.

From Frequently Asked Questions to Tutoring

Jeanne Franco, accounting faculty at Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC) designed one of the first successful models of tutoring online (J. Franco, personal communication, 1997). This model grew out of a partnership between the PVCC Learning Support Center and Jeanne Franco. Her design included web pages and the use of an asynchronous discussion forum, called WebBoard. As an instructor, she began the web page by listing all the chapters in the accounting textbook and the frequently asked questions (FAQs) for each chapter. Students could refer to the answers to the FAQs before making contact with a tutor. Tutors could follow up on questions for everyone on the WebBoard or chat individually with a student. This resource became so popular that students outside of the college soon started to use it. Eventually the decision was made to limit access to the online tutoring section to only PVCC students, but to leave the FAQs open to all. Finally, the model was moved to Blackboard and limited to PVCC students. However, this initial model spawned 19 more content-specific online tutoring sections with a variety of designs, specific to each content area and designed by faculty in conjunction with the Learning Support Center (Paradise Valley Community College, 2006).

Online Tutoring for Online Classes

Barbara Speidel at Southwest College in California designed the next model that emerged. She initially tried to follow the PVCC model. “However, I encountered enrollment glitches and instructor support problems, so I went to plan B... to embed academic support

within each online class....” (B. Speidel, personal communication, November 2003).

This model included a direct link to Academic Support within the online psychology class on Blackboard. A button labeled *Academic Support* on the left side Table of Contents, between *Staff Information* and *Communication*, led to a page which included such headings as:

- How Does it Work?
- What Is Available?
- Academic Support Documents and Links.

The section *What Is Available* had four links:

- Academic Support Documents and Links
- Psychology Web Resources
- Online Writing Center
- Campus Tutoring.

Students clicking on *Campus Tutoring* would get a page specific to the course, called *Meet Your Psychology Tutors*. Although this model began as academic support inside online classes, it soon grew to content specific support for face-to-face students and finally for college skills tutoring for hybrid courses (B. Speidel, personal communication, November 2003).

Transitioning to Real Time Chat in WebCT

Howard Community College’s nursing program developed a specific group-tutoring program for their nursing students. Besides using faculty-developed study guides, the group-tutoring program provides for real time chats in WebCT. Using both the study guides and the chats, students are able to practice application of concepts and learn to work together in productive study groups (Sipe, 1998).

WebCT’s chat feature is also used at The Community College of Baltimore County, which offers Cyber Tutoring for a variety of courses. Faculty can indicate that they want online tutoring available to their class and students are automatically enrolled in the tutoring section for that class. This helps facilitate student access to the tutoring sessions for that particular class (Community College of Baltimore County, 2006).

From Asynchronous to Synchronous

The previous models have used asynchronous (not real time) tools. The next level of tutoring online looks at using synchronous models, where students and tutors can interact simultaneously. One of the earliest synchronous models was with the use of NetTutor for math tutoring at Utah Valley State College. This tutoring is called MathLab Online and described as "...a chat room designed for doing math" (Utah Valley State College, 2004, Online Tutoring, para. 1).

NetTutor as a tool includes an interactive whiteboard with clickable math symbols. For example, no longer do students have to type in the words "square root" to indicate the symbol. They can simply click on the symbol and have it appear on the whiteboard and move directly to questions on the operation itself. This integrated whiteboard is changing the way math and science tutoring takes place online. However, there is a learning curve involved and like all new tools, users tend to want to use all the features all at once.

The online tutoring model at Pima Community College also used NetTutor to provide academic support for its students. The online tutoring service was originally conceived as a means to provide assistance for students enrolled in distance learning classes. However, before its launch, the program was opened up as a free resource available to all Pima students. Tutoring is provided in writing, math, and accounting. Students who wish to use the service obtain an access code from their instructor or the West Campus Learning Center. Students may choose to communicate with a tutor in real time or may leave questions and retrieve the tutor's response at a later time. The program provides a number of options: one-on-one tutoring; group sessions led by a tutor; and sessions that include groups of students, their instructor, and a tutor for support. As online tutoring continues to grow, there is an expectation that more academic subjects will be added to the service. After Pima's yearlong pilot project, the tutors are now developing best practices, which focus not on the technology itself, but on the development of the whole online tutoring environment.

Expanding Tutoring Services

While NetTutor typically uses tutors from the local institution,

some institutions may want to expand their tutoring pool and use Smarthinking, which provides professionally trained tutors, with their service. Both the University of North Dakota (University of North Dakota, 2004) and the Art Institute of Washington (Chediak, 2005) use Smarthinking along with their local tutors.

In a study completed in 2004, the California Virtual College and Smarthinking found that adoption and utilization were lower than expected (Doherty & Atkinson, 2004). One of the major factors was the lack of institutional and faculty experience with online tutoring, both of which had negative impact on student use. As a company, Smarthinking has recognized the need to develop the culture of online tutoring and to this end, now provides sample online tutorials for a variety of subjects, from writing to math, from accounting to economics and even math tutoring in Spanish (Smarthinking, 2006).

Publishers are also offering a number of hours of online tutoring bundled with textbook adoptions. For example, Houghton Mifflin (n.d.) bundles Smarthinking online tutoring with specific texts and Addison-Wesley Higher Education Group Service provides The Tutor Center. The Tutor Center provides one-on-one tutoring in over 20 disciplines from statistics to American government, from astronomy to human anatomy and physiology. The service comes packaged with the student's textbook and once a student is registered, "the student is entitled to contact The Tutor Center three times per night" (Addison Wesley, 2006).

BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE TUTORING

From the two yearlong studies that were the basis for this article we have gleaned the following best practices for online tutoring.

Defining the Parameters

Prior to using technology, the climate of tutoring online must first be developed by addressing the questions: what is it and how do we use it? For example, Hughes at the University of Wisconsin (UW) helps clarify the parameters for his writing center by posting on the web site what the tutoring center cannot and can do: "we do not edit and proofread papers;" instead, the goal of the Writing Center is "to teach you to do these things for yourself so that you can become a better, more confident

writer” (UW Madison Writing Center, 2004, About Proofreading and Editing, para. 2). Students are then referred to the web site’s Writer’s Handbook for more writing resources.

Moreover, part of establishing the online tutoring environment is to establish the expectations and the parameters for students. Fullerton College Tutoring Center, for example, provides samples of appropriate and inappropriate questions for tutoring in English and math. They also coordinate online and on-campus tutoring policies: “We cannot do Online what is against our policies in a live [sic] tutoring session” (Fullerton College, 2005).

Creating the Online Tutoring Climate

Once online expectations are laid out, the online climate for tutoring must be created. Part of the difficulty of tutoring online without the benefit of video is “interfacing with the faceless” (P. Turrentine, personal communication, May 25, 2005). However, the human interface can be developed on a web page by including tutor pictures and biographies. For example, at PVCC (2006) tutors are listed by the subjects they tutor along with a photo, brief biography and work schedule.

If photos are not possible, tutors at Pima suggest that, “a cartoon figure might be used to represent the tutor as a means of assisting in establishing some rapport” (P. Turrentine, personal communication, May 25, 2005). Also, Atlantic City Community College (ACCC) students recommend that the tutor introductions include “a human dimension” (S. Miller, personal communication April 21, 2001).

In addition, when designing the online environment one needs to create specific strategies to deal with the lack of body language and eye contact. Tutors at Pima, having completed a yearlong tutoring online project, describe the climate as a sense of transparency. “Do not use the computer screen as a mask. Instead, make it a window. The students should ‘see’ a smiling, helpful, understanding person with whom they can communicate without having to wait for the moment of ‘unmasking’” (P. Turrentine, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

Greeting the Students

The initial contact in online tutoring is very important. Miller’s (2001) list of *Best Practices in Tutoring Online* emphasizes the need to establish contact immediately. Tutors at Pima recommend that greetings must

come first—before the tutoring process begins. “Greet students and introduce yourself in a way that makes the student feel welcome before inviting them to share the problem...” (P. Turrentine personal communication, May 25, 2005). Note the use of the word “invite” which speaks of establishing a social climate of tutoring online.

This means, “both online tutoring intake personnel and online tutors should check their email/bulletin boards daily” (S. Miller, personal communication, April 21, 2001). In a synchronous environment, a verbal nod of the head recognition may be necessary, even though students may be able to see where they are in the queue. Acknowledgement of who is in the online tutoring environment should be part of the design.

The Tutoring Process

Working in the online environment is still new for both tutors and students. Miller recommends “trying to encourage the students as much as possible because they often tend to feel quite lost, alone and discouraged. Let them know that the online procedure is new and will get easier” (S. Miller, personal communication, April 21, 2001). Students using a synchronous tutoring system, like NetTutor and Smarthinking may need an overview of the tool itself, before participating in the online tutoring environment. Tutors at Pima who used NetTutor recommend to “keep it simple.” The format of communicating online (no matter how transparent the tutor attempts to make the session) requires that everything be simple to understand” (P. Turrentine, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

Best practices of face-to-face tutoring in Socratic mode also apply to online tutoring. However, some students resist the guided discovery learning process. Miller suggests that “it’s important to communicate to the student why you’re doing it this way and that it won’t take long before they get it on their own” (S. Miller, personal communication, April 21, 2001).

If a white board is not available in the specific online environment, it is extremely important to give extra illustrative examples. Those in a synchronous environment must realize that pauses in communication can be caused by any number of factors. For example, a student may be taking notes, may be thinking of how to phrase a response, or may not understand the concept. The critical factor here as recommended by Pima tutors is “Check for the student’s level of understanding of your

instruction and go back, if necessary. PATIENCE! [sic]" (P. Turrentine, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

One of the differences in the online environment versus the face-to-face environment is the effect of tone and word usage. In the online environment, without the assistance of body language or eye contact, the tone comes across much stronger. Tutors need to recognize this and either strive to soften the tone of written responses or add emoticons (text smiley faces) or phrases, such as "smiling helpfully," "hold on," or "we're ½ way there." ACCC recommends that tutors "avoid words that might be taken in a negative way" (S. Miller, personal communication, April 21, 2001). Providing body language cues in print may take some practice for tutors who are not used to communicating everything in writing.

Feedback becomes even more important in this environment. If essays are returned in editing mode, then students will think that online tutoring is an editing service. Miller recommends, "the tutor should include a note that gives some positive feedback" (S. Miller, personal communication, April 21, 2001). Pima tutors suggest an ongoing tutoring relationship by recommending to tutors: "Be very specific in the praise you give students and point out specific things that the two of you should continue to work on (P. Turrentine, personal communication, May 25, 2005). Also, "the more positive regard that the tutor can include in their remarks and interactions with the students, the more likely it is that the student will continue to seek the tutor's assistance" (P. Turrentine, personal communication, May 25, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The evolution of online tutoring has showed us that success may not depend so much upon the tool selected, but on the development of an appropriate culture for online tutoring, an understanding of the process and parameters involved.

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