

Chapter II

The Role of the Tutor in Blended E–Learning: Experiences from Interprofessional Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on an implementation of blended e-learning within three modules in the School of Health and Social Care at Oxford Brookes University. All preregistration students within the school are required to take an interprofessional education module in each year of their study. These three modules have undergone a radical redesign, prompted by the school and university strategies for e-learning and the European and UK National Health Service IT skills agenda. The redesign resulted in a blended-learning strategy that combined face-to-face teaching with online work of increasing sophistication during each of the three modules. In each module, there was an emphasis on collaborative, interprofessional learning. Interviews were conducted with seven members of the course teams to ask them about their perceptions of their roles as tutors in this blended environment. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed five elements of the tutors' roles: relationships with students, supporting group work, supporting professional learning, managing the blend, and developing new tutoring skills. The implications are discussed for improving staff development for tutors in this case study and for our understanding of blended learning more generally.

BACKGROUND

Online Tutoring in Blended Environments

The role of the online tutor has been discussed for more than 20 years now, producing wide-ranging descriptions of the roles undertaken by tutors that cover pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical functions (see Berge, 1995), and advice and guidance for tutors (Mason, 1991; Salmon, 2004). Despite the attention that has been paid to documenting the online tutor's role, there is still a need for us to more fully understand the impact of increased use of technology on teachers' roles in higher education today. In part this is due to the changing context: the shift from tutors operating fully online to a blended-learning environment. The research on the tutor's role has largely been conducted on courses where students are working online at a distance, and students and tutors never meet. For example, Moule (2007), in a critique of Salmon's e-moderating framework and working from a health care background, argues that "the five stage model has not reflected the potential available to use e-learning as part of an integrated approach that includes face to face delivery" (p. 39). The use of blended learning is increasing rapidly in the United Kingdom (HEFCE, 2005), North America (Bonk, Kim, & Zeng, 2006), and Australia (Eklund, Kay, & Lynch, 2003), and we are only just starting to unpick what this means for the tutor.

In part our need to understand online tutoring in the blended context is also due to the mounting evidence that there are variations in how tutors take on their expected roles and the difference this makes to students who have high expectations of online tutors (e.g., Connolly, Jones, & Jones, 2007; Miers, Clarke, Laphorn, Pollard, Thomas, & Turtle, 2005). We are starting to see more publications reporting not the early successes of computer-mediated communication, but more realistic struggles to get students to engage at

all (e.g., Ham & Davey, 2005) or at the standard expected (e.g., Clouder & Deepwell, 2004). This point is important. We should not assume that all staff will have the same responses to teaching online as the early adopters. We note that many early adopters were educationalists themselves and teaching other educators or postgraduate students. Historically, online courses have been designed with a clear pedagogy based on notions of collaboration and constructivism that are understood and adopted by designers and tutors alike (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; McConnell, 2000). Other qualitative studies of the teacher's role have examined the beliefs and behaviors of those tutors who were also the course designers and early adopters of technology (McShane, 2004). It is important that such staff are not the only ones whose voices are heard as we develop guidance for online tutors.

As blended learning becomes embedded into the practices of higher education, many more staff are involved, some of whom have not made an active choice to adopt technology, have not been involved in the pedagogical redesign decisions, and are not all sharing the same responsibilities. In the case study described here, the course redesign led to a compulsory change in the lecturers' roles to blended teaching for approximately 30 staff. Capturing the perceptions and experiences of these staff represents a valuable addition to our current knowledge of the demands, challenges, and rewards of tutoring online within a blended context.

Blended Learning within the School of Health and Social Care

In 2004 the university had produced a strategy for e-learning that required each school to debate and explore how they could best use technology (see Sharpe, Benfield, & Francis, 2006). Each school was expected to develop, publish, and maintain their own e-learning strategy, part of which included the identification of high-impact e-learning

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