

"EMBEDDING THE SKILLS TO TEACH ONLINE - IS IT TECHNICAL OR PERSONALITY SKILLS THAT ARE NEEDED?"

Introduction

Being cautious about the routine use of PowerPoint I decided to provide workshop participants with a document instead. It consists of:

- a straw poll which I carried for this event with 6 people with a “track record” in online learning, from a range of organisations and roles in the UK and the US;
- a short Appendix about the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), for whom I work half-time.

Respondents to the straw poll

Vivienne Drake, Julia Duggleby, David Jennings, Robin Mason, Burks Oakley, Clive Shepherd, Adrian Snook.

The questions I put to them

- i) what is your 50-100 word (say) answer/reaction/response to the title of the workshop?
- ii) what 4 or 5 books, articles, courses, URLs etc would you say have most influenced your views?

Responses

Vivienne Drake, Manager of the Ufi Ltd e-Learning Team – <http://www.learndirect.co.uk/>

Below, I have listed what I see as the essential skills of those teaching, tutoring or supporting online learners. ‘Personality skills’ may not be the best phrase to use, but the main point is that, in my opinion, a high level of technical expertise is not required, although a certain level is essential in order to be able to support learners effectively, using the tools available.

To teach, tutor or support online learners, you need to have the following skills:

- literacy, so that your communications are clear and accurate, providing an example to the learner. This does not mean that you have to expect clarity and accuracy from your learners, nor that you should have to correct spellings and grammar.
- to be able to communicate sensitively, i.e. to be aware of how to write text without causing ambiguity, misunderstanding or offence.
- to have empathy with your learners, i.e. understanding that what you take for granted may be alien to your learners.
- to work smartly, i.e. not only knowing when and by what means to contact learners, but also to achieve the balance between providing effective support without committing yourself to an unmanageable workload.
- to be organised at keeping records.

What has had most influence of my understanding of these issues?

- The LeTTOL course that I took and the example that my tutor set in her communications.
- As a LeTTOL tutor, the way the team worked and the way in which we supported each other.

I have not been particularly influenced by anything that I have read, although I agree with much of what Gilly Salmon has written (perhaps I should read more), but have reached the above opinions from practical experience of face to face and online tutoring, and of dealing with issues arising from observing the practice of tutors supporting **learndirect** learners.

Julia Duggleby, Online Learning Manager, The Sheffield College – <http://www.sheffcol.ac.uk/>

A good online tutor does need technical skills. They, and their learners will suffer, if the tutor isn't a technically competent. But competence is what is needed, not techie expertise. The technical skills needed are (in no particular order):

- reasonably speedy keyboarding skills;
- an ability to use advanced features of an email client (eg folders, filters) An ability to locate and evaluate web resources (though I'm not sure if this is really a technical skill);
- good understanding/practice regarding security and back-up strategies;
- knowledge of the basic and advanced features of any other relevant, course-specific technologies (eg conferencing, chat, VLE).

So to the personality skills. I would say that there are core tutoring skills that are needed whatever the delivery system. These include:

- subject knowledge;
- enthusiasm;
- a knowledge of the course aims and assessment strategy;
- an ability to give sympathetic support to individuals;
- the ability to organise and support learning groups;
- good organisation (harder online than f2f).

I think where technology and personality intertwine are in these areas:

- tutors must deploy the technology creatively and continually update knowledge;
- they should be aware of the challenges that the technology can present to learners, and how they can be overcome;
- they must communicate well using asynchronous text based systems, that is be able to write messages that are coherent, absolutely clear, and employ a sympathetic tone. And also occasionally giving learners a tactful shove in the right direction without that learner feeling harried.

I would think that Gilly Salmon's Five Step model ought to get a mention: <http://www.atimod.com/e-moderating/fivestep.htm>

So should Zane L Berge - and his work is important I think for the theme of your workshop:

http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html

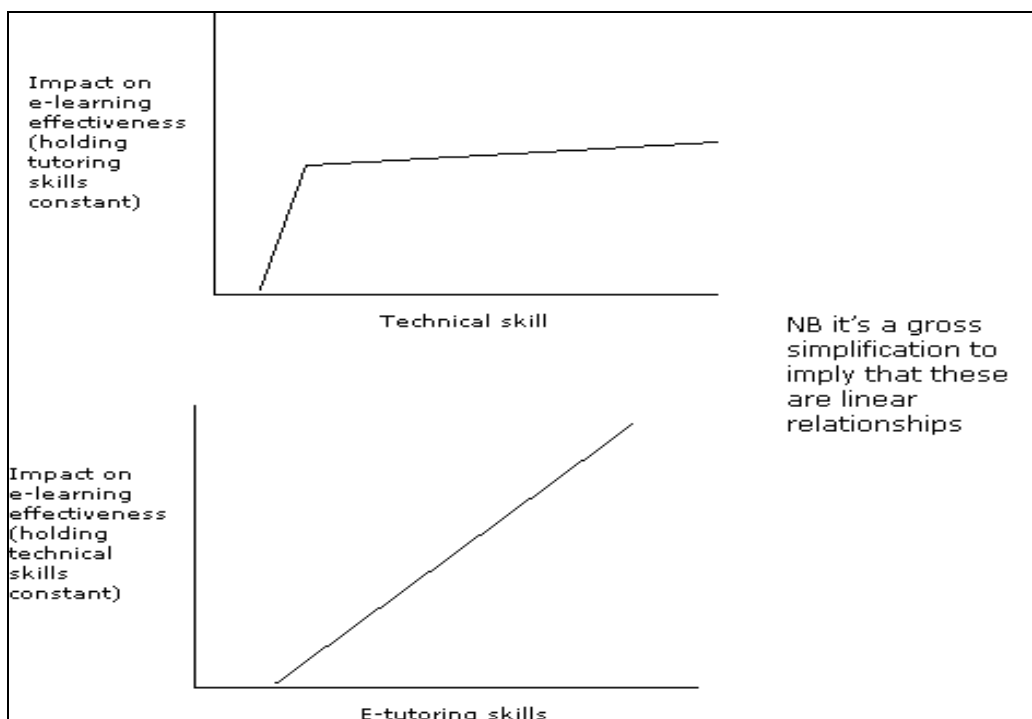
I take it you will mention LeTTOL: <http://www.lettol.ac.uk/> , and my book ;-)¹

David Jennings, DJ Alchemi Ltd – <http://davidjennings.info>

The only technical skills required are competence in exploiting all the relevant features of the learning environment, and familiarity with relevant web resources. Beyond the level of competence, the pay-off from extra technical 'virtuosity' is negligible.

On the other hand, the impact of social/tutoring skills - including empathy with learners sufficient to know when to lead/guide them, when to step in to support, how to coach/cajole/encourage them - is likely to continue to increase with greater virtuosity.

This is expressed in the following (extremely crude) graphs.



¹ * How to be an online tutor - **Publisher:** Gower Publishing Limited; ISBN: 0566082470

Books, articles, courses, URLs etc. Hubert Dreyfus, On the Internet (2001); John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, The Social Life of Information (2000); Learning to Teach Online <http://www.lettol.ac.uk>; Further background to/elaboration of my views (including links to other articles and books) can be found at http://alchemy.co.uk/archives/cat_elearning.html.

Robin Mason, Professor of Educational Technology at the Open University – <http://iet.open.ac.uk/>

I choose to see the title in a positive way as putting the same question that we use on our online Masters in Online and Distance Education as a collaborative debate activity. We phrase it something like: is teaching online a new paradigm or is a good teacher good in any medium? It is always a fascinating debate and I personally have been swayed by good arguments to believe either side of the argument. In other words, the title is asking, is teaching online a set of techniques that can be learned, or is it essentially the same as any form of teaching (and hence requiring all the same skills as any form of teaching). In my experience, there are a few tips or techniques that can be learned, but essentially teachers simply have to find what I call their own 'voice' in the online medium.

Influential books, articles, urls? I would say that it is people who have influenced me more than books. Betty Collis, Linda Harasim, Terry Anderson, Dave McConnell - they have been the pioneers in the field and I have always valued my interactions with them.

Burks Oakley, Director of University of Illinois Online - <http://www.online.uillinois.edu/>

Interesting that when I give talks about e-learning, I always mention that we are soon approaching the time when the "e" will go away, and we will just be talking about "learning". And now you are ADDING the "e"!!

Online learning is NOT about technology - the web-based technologies are just a vehicle that enables high quality learning at a distance. These technologies are constantly changing, and we have to have enough familiarity with them to do our job - which is to teach.

For faculty to become good online teachers, they need to have an experience as an online student, and they need to study the pedagogy of online learning. To this end, we implemented the Illinois Online Network (ION) for faculty development in the state of Illinois. We offer a series of online courses for faculty, called "Making the Virtual Classroom a Reality" (MVCR). Faculty can earn a Master Online Teacher certificate by taking a set of the MVCR courses. See:

- <http://www.ion.illinois.edu/>
- <http://www.mvcr.org/default.asp>

Clive Shepherd, Fastrack Consulting – <http://www.fastrak-consulting.co.uk/>

Anyone facilitating an online course must have a mastery of the basics of online communication (using email, forums, chat rooms, managing contacts and files, etc.). They must also have an empathy for technology; in other words they must believe that online learning works.

Of course both of these can be acquired in time, but I would make both a prerequisite.

Over and above these technical skills, a variety of other skills are clearly required:

- subject-matter experts must know their subject;
- e-coaches must know how to coach face-to-face;
- teachers using virtual classrooms must be able to teach in a real classroom.

It's not either/or, it's both.

None of the books or articles I've read have informed these views particularly, just experience.

Adrian Snook, Director of Corporate Development, The Training Foundation – <http://www.trainingfoundation.com/>

The Certified e-learning Professional (CeLP) programme has always recognised the different sets of competencies underpinning the distinct roles of the e-Learning Consultant, e-Learning Manager, e-Learning Developer, e-Learning Tutor and more latterly the Virtual Trainer. The competency frameworks for each of these specialist roles may be downloaded in Acrobat Format from: www.elearningprofessional.com.

For the purposes of this event I have interpreted the phrase 'teaching on-line' as relating to activities carried out by those supporting remote learners in synchronous and asynchronous modes, or delivering sessions through a synchronous Virtual Classroom tools. However it is important to remember that these individuals are the visible face of a much larger team that carries out a much broader range of interdependent specialist activities. Even fully qualified e-Learning Tutors and Virtual Trainers will fail in the objective of 'teaching on-line' if they are not supporting instructionally sound on-line course resources, are bedevilled with technical problems or are not operating within a programme that is managed effectively.

In our experience those individuals with formal training in conventional classroom training delivery skills and face-to-face learning facilitation cope best when being trained to 'teach' on-line. This is because the balance between delivery style, structure and activity is as important on-line as it is in the classroom and because the role of learning facilitator is essentially the same, but gated by some significant technical restrictions.

Having said that, an individual with PC literacy and no prior experience of teaching is capable of achieving the standards required for certification as an e-Learning Tutor or Virtual Trainer, because the necessary behaviours are modelled effectively by very intensive support and on-line practice sessions.

The Training Foundation developed the Certified e-Learning Professional (CeLP) programme under advice and direction from Clive Shepherd. The curriculum is based on competency frameworks devised by the Institute of IT Training (www.iitt.org.uk) with input from 13 other experts including Julia Duggleby, Seb Schmoller and representatives from Ufi, Edexcel, the OU, and the e-Learning Network.

Appendix - About ALT

ALT's "line" on ICT in learning and teaching

ALT understands learning technology as the systematic application of a body of knowledge to the design, implementation and evaluation of learning resources. The body of knowledge – the fruit of research and practice – is based on principles of good learning theory, instructional design and change management, but is grounded in a good understanding of the underlying technologies and their capabilities. ALT believes that learning technology can add value to both the efficiency and the effectiveness of the learning process.

What we do

ALT is a "professional and scholarly association" which seeks to bring together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology by:

- promoting good practice in the use of learning technologies in education and industry;
- representing the members in areas of policy;
- facilitating collaboration between practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

ALT's work is supported by 3.5 FTE (soon to be 4.5) staff, 3 (4) of whom are based in the ALT Office at Oxford Brookes University. We:

- organise conferences, workshops, visits and exchanges, including ALT-C, which is the UK's main academic conference for learning technologists (which will take place next year in Exeter, 14-16 September – <http://www.alt.ac.uk/alte2004/>), and an annual Policy Meeting – this year's (8/7/2003) saw the formal launch by Charles Clarke of the DfES e-learning strategy consultation – next year's will be held at HP Labs in Bristol, and be about learning technology research policy;
- publish a quarterly Newsletter, the ALT Journal (an international peer-reviewed journal devoted to research and good practice in the use of learning technologies within tertiary education), a fortnightly members' email digest, and a range of publications aimed at practitioners, sometimes produced in conjunction with other organisations;
- respond to consultations – HE White Paper, HEFCE 2003-2008 Strategy; to the LSC/DfES Joint Implementation Group; to FENTO concerning the setting up of a Lifelong Learning Sector Skills Council – see <http://www.alt.ac.uk/documents.html> for some examples.

Members

~ 500 individuals, 100 HEIs (up by 11% on September 2002), 50 FEIs and equivalent (up by 38%), 34 corporate members (up by 160%). New corporate members in 2003 include the BBC, DfES, Epic plc, HEFCE, HP, LSC, LSDA, Microsoft, NATFHE, Nesta Futurelab, NHSU, RM plc, Scottish Enterprise.

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