



## The Role of the Tutor in Online Learning

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This study investigates the beliefs of online tutors who participated in focus group interviews to discuss issues that impact on positive engagement within an online Bachelor of Education Degree. Just as teachers engage students in discussions and learning activities on campus, so it is online. However, online teaching is not without its intricacies and complexities: students have rarely met one another or their teacher; communication is void of visual clues; the managing of time can be problematic; and there can be difficulties in monitoring individual learning. As in any teaching situation, the role of the online educator is crucial in ensuring effective learning outcomes. To be effective, teachers require much more than technical competence. They need to have an understanding of the dynamics of online communication and interactions and need to learn effective ways of facilitating and teaching online. This paper reports some initial findings.

Keywords: online learning; tutor training; role of online tutor; online engagement

### Background

The School of Education at Curtin University has been preparing professionals for practice in a wide range of education-related fields since 1974, with a history of delivering courses utilising different modes: face-to-face, external paper-based, external online and more recently blended learning environments in the majority of the face-to-face courses. In 2009 a new delivery mode for the Bachelor of Education (B Ed), Primary Degree emerged whereby the course is delivered totally online with the exception of the professional practice components (Kuzich, Groves, O'Hare & Pelliccione, 2010).

The B.Ed course is offered in three ways with each having the same structure and units regardless of whether it is taught on campus, regionally or online. The units match in content and assessment and all use Blackboard Academic Suite as the Learning Management System (LMS). The online iteration is offered through Open Universities Australia (OUA), with open access to students for six of the eight first year units. Students from all states in Australia and internationally are attracted to the course and some units in particular attract enrolments of over two thousand students. These students come to study from a variety of backgrounds that are not necessarily typical of a first year university student cohort. Many have not studied for a long time, some have left school before completion of Year 12, some are in full-time work and looking for a career change, some have English language issues and in terms of the skills necessary for negotiation of Blackboard and an online learning environment, most are technologically inexperienced. Although for many of the online students, the LMS is the sole source of unit information, documentation submission of assessments and interactions between the

students, the teachers and the content, considerable thought has been given to assisting student development in the use of technology and optimising the likelihood of active engagement. This has been done through a range of enterprise technologies such as Elluminate Live and Campus Pack blogs, wikis and journals as well as open source Web 2.0 technologies. Contrary to initial expectations, not all students demonstrate that they are technologically sophisticated. Indeed many students appear to be rather tentative—frightened that they could break something or lose information into cyberspace in some way—and generally nervous about learning technologies (Herrington, Schrape, Flintoff, Leaver, Molineux & O’Hare, 2010). Additionally, this course has a large teaching cohort of part time sessional staff, many of whom are new to this style of teaching. It is essential to ensure the quality of the teaching program. This paper outlines some of the relevant issues.

## **Introduction**

Curtin University employs part-time tutors who act as a human interface between the university and its students. For the B.Ed primary online degree, each tutor is responsible for a group of approximately 75 students, giving content specific support for learning through a Blackboard site designed to encourage collaborative learning. Although studies have suggested that the ideal number for on-line tutorials is less than 25-30 (Anderson, 2004; Arbaugh & Benbunan-Finch, 2006), at Curtin this ideal teacher/student ratio of 1:30 is not supported by commercial reality. For this online course the tutorial groups have a tutor:student ratio of 1:75. These tutorial sizes of 75 students are something the course designers, tutors and students have to work with and around, but they do present an area of concern about how tutors are to maintain effective contact with their students and how to ensure that tentative students who are shy about using on-line communication mechanisms are not lost in the sheer weight of numbers. On one hand there is the formalized and structured LMS which guides students through weekly tasks and readings in much the same way as an on campus class would do and on the other, the desire to encourage students to learn through their interest in a developing community of practice (Wenger, 1999) where effective learning can be encouraged and developed. A community can only grow if there is effective interaction between various groups of people. Rogoff’s (2001) research suggests that effective and deep learning occurs when instruction is focused on collaboration. Additionally, collaborative learning and working in teams is recognized as a key competency for students (Guo & Stevens, 2011). This study considers some of the issues involved in supporting effective online collaboration with large groups of students.

## **Background literature**

The teacher of any classroom, whether it has solid walls or is virtual, has much influence in shaping the learning environment and outcomes and carries the responsibility for creating the conditions that encourage a deep approach to learning which demonstrates a dynamic and interactive “community of inquiry” (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). From the teachers’ perspectives this means that they have pedagogical skills and content knowledge that allow them to manage a learning environment that develops and encourages students to think critically and to learn both independently and collaboratively. From each student’s perspective, this requires higher-order cognitive processing that includes critical thinking and self-direction (Garrison and Archer, 2000).

For many staff as well as students, being part of an online learning community is a new experience. Newcomers face particular difficulties: many are new to study, many are new to this method of teaching, many are tentative about embarking upon a new endeavour and many are very nervous about their capacity to succeed. Within this online learning community, student engagement is highly valued. This has been defined by Coates as comprising “active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities” (2007, p. 122). At Curtin, this active and collaborative learning is developed within the LMS and particularly through the discussion board where students are encouraged to support one another’s learning through weekly discussion tasks.

## **Peer supported learning**

Anderson (2006) believes that although teacher/student interaction is critically important for certain personalized learning outcomes it must be used judiciously if it is not to constrain access to formal learning through too high a cost. He sees a migration but not elimination of direct teacher-to-student interaction to student-to-student and student-to-content learning designs.

In a similar vein, and in contrast to the idea of master-to-apprentice interactions that are common in the education field, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999) have provided some useful insights into the apprentice-to-apprentice interactions that underpin peer learning (Juwah, 2006). Within a peer learning environment, there is no account taken of status and participants collaborate to learn with and from one another. The power of the teacher status and possible domination is removed. The key to peer learning is the mutually supportive learning environment where learners construct and express opinions, test ideas and offer and request help as required (Smith, 1983). However, this is not a process that can be left unmonitored. For learners to participate and gain positively from the experience, strategies need to be put in place to ensure that students are skilled in learning how to learn through information technology and be able to access, navigate and utilise what is on offer to develop meaningful learning (Juwah, 2006). Online tutors have a responsibility to ensure that the learning outcomes are clearly defined to allow students to take ownership of their learning, monitor their progress and evaluate their success.

### **Pedagogical implications for online discussion**

Discussion boards and chat facilities are common tools in the online teaching and learning environment, but Mishra and Juwah (2006) found that this versatile tool is often not used to its full effectiveness and that not all students are comfortable in its use. The reasons given were cultural, linguistic or fear of inadequacy in language ability, or fear of a lack of effective skills in technology. Students in Mishra's and Juwah's study identified that they were self-conscious about academic language ability; intimidated by others' better grammar and syntax; nervous of the permanence of the online written word; and lack of typing speed affecting the ability to get one's thoughts composed. Students also found that in many cases the posts on discussion boards were "irrelevant" and "unwieldy" due to the sheer volume of postings. This caused students to lose sight of the essence of the discussion (Mishra & Juwah, 2006). Unless discussions are structured properly, the online conversations can lead to little consolidation of an issue. If the online discussion is simply a forum where students share experiences without taking any account of others' opinions within their group, then the purpose of the interaction becomes more of a "read what everyone else says, but write what you think" (Wood, 2002) rather than a genuine opportunity to share, develop and consolidate ideas. Mishra and Juwah (2006) give some advice for tutors to ensure that students are given the best opportunities for successful interaction in their online discussions with the most relevant to this paper highlighted:

- Purpose, context and intended outcomes must be established
- Learners should be socialized in the effective use of a discussion board
- Links should be made to the intended learning outcomes to ensure that students are aware of the relevance of the discussion.
- Feedback, or more appropriately, feed-forward should be given in the form of a summary of the posts to assist in focusing of the learning
- When a discussion appears to be going nowhere or is irrelevant to the topic, the tutor should end that thread and create a new one steering the discussion in the right direction.

Additionally, Wood (2002) recommends the process within a Graduate Business School where students are 'required' to comment on at least two other students' comments, and are rewarded for the participation with a percentage of the overall grade.

### **Sense of community**

Researchers have characterized communities in a range of ways often based on underlying social philosophies (Barab, 2003). A community provides a sense of belonging, identity, emotional connection and wellbeing (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). The need for belonging has been identified as one of the five human basic needs (Glasser, 1986) with a sense of place identified as being essential for online students (Brook & Oliver, 2003) perhaps even "crucial to their overall experience of learning" (Northcote, 2008, p. 677). When people feel that they are part of a strong community, they feel better adjusted, and supported, feel connected to others and share common goals that may be above their individual aspirations (Fisher, Sonn & Bishop, 2002). A strong sense of community is likely to support student learning if students feel that they are free to express their identities in an environment that diminishes feelings of loneliness or isolation (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). It appears that students have a need to feel that their individual contributions have value and can add positively to the discussion and ultimately the learning not only individually, but also the overall learning community. To have their voices heard, there needs to be evidence of reciprocal interactional activity. However, it is also important for tutors to have a similar sense of belonging. They too need to feel that they are given opportunities to contribute and that they can value add to the learning opportunities (Vlachopoulos, 2008).

## The role of the online leader

As identified by Vlachopoulos, (2008) the role of online educator has been defined in a wide range of ways including tutor, teacher, facilitator, promoter, manager, discussion leader, negotiator, and E-moderator. Whatever name is given, the role is a complex one and the challenges should not be underestimated. Many tutors who are new to online teaching, without relevant background or experience of online pedagogy are often asked to contribute to the development and delivery of courses (Vlachopoulos, 2008). There is a real danger that these members of staff are being asked to run before they can walk without a clear picture of what the role looks like and whether it is very different from what they have previously experienced. VanLehn, Siler, Murray, Yamauchi and Baggett (2003) argue that learning opportunities are just that – opportunities to learn and that not all students learn when provided with those opportunities. Tutors have to establish whether a different approach is to be adopted or if their familiar strategies will be effective in the development of learning.

Many researchers offer contributions to the research of online learning. Salmon (2003) describes the process as developing over five stages: access and motivation; socialization; information exchange; knowledge construction; and development with each stage demanding different tutor skills. Collison, Erlbaum, Haavind and Tinker (2001) believe that the role of the tutor is to guide and moderate. Facilitation of learning rather than leading is developed through appropriate communications.

Berge (2006), identifies four categories: *social* (where students are encouraged in a friendly, social environment with teachers affirming and recognising input and providing opportunities for group cohesiveness to develop); *managerial* (provision of objectives, setting of timelines and defining of rules and roles); *technical* (ensuring all participants develop confidence in the network systems and software) and *pedagogical* (where teachers provide insights from their subject knowledge and experience using questions and probes to encourage student responses). Similarly, Hootstein (2002) suggests a model where tutors put themselves in four different “pairs of shoes” those of the *instructor* – providing informative feedback; *social director* – fostering collaborative learning; *program manager* – developing and providing study guides; and *technical assistant* – helping the learners to become proficient with the technology.

This research identifies what online tutors consider as the significant aspects of their individual roles specifically relating to interaction.

## Methodology

A qualitative interpretive approach as described by Merriam (2002) was selected because the focus was on the perceptions of the individuals who shared the experience of online teaching in the one course. This approach allowed a focus on the nature of the experience of being an online tutor and how these tutors accounted for the decisions that they make to support engagement within their online teaching groups.

As identified earlier, many teaching staff are new to online pedagogy. To support them at Curtin University, training is provided before each of the four study periods. An additional training session is offered for those tutors who also coordinate units. These training sessions are set up to practise what we preach in that groups work together to provide peer support. Experienced tutors work with less experienced tutors being offered a range of experiences over a six-hour session. These include such things as presentations and discussions around the theoretical underpinnings of online pedagogy, strategies for being an effective tutor, technology support and specific information around the particular unit that they will be teaching within for the relevant study period.

A group of 52 tutors attended a training day three weeks before the start of study period 2, 2011. These tutors would all be teaching in a range of units for the coming study period. As part of the on going development of the training process, it was decided to ascertain what issues were pertinent to this group of tutors. Participants took part in five separate semi-structured group interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed. There were around ten members in each group. The transcripts were analysed using a content analysis approach whereby the common issues and themes were identified.

## Findings and discussion

The 52 tutors came to this training session with a range of educational qualifications and experience. All were qualified teachers with 35 holding undergraduate qualifications, 12 with Masters degrees and five with

Doctorates. Ten tutors were just about to commence their first study period of online teaching and six tutors had already completed eight study periods, having worked in a range of units since the degree commenced. The remaining 36 had a range of experience ranging from two study periods to seven study periods.

Within their groups, tutors were asked to comment on their views of online learning and teaching. They felt that the job came with a range of ups and downs.

### The highlights of online learning

- Autonomous but connected

Tutors were asked to outline the most positive aspect of their online teaching role. It was generally felt that the opportunity to stay at home autonomously, without having to engage in traffic, work meetings or the politics of attending a work place each day were favourable factors. The majority agreed that they enjoyed *“watching students grow and develop over a study period”* and that they were *“surprised”* at how *“close”* were the *“relationships”* and *“connections”* that they built up with their students. Additionally they were *“delighted”* and *“pleased”* at how well tutors supported one another within units. They considered that there was a *“strong collegial sharing aspect to the role”* with tutors *“happy to allow others into their discussion board”* to see how they had set things up and that they felt *“welcome to use other tutors’ ideas and materials”*. They also stated that they benefitted from the *“intellectual challenge”* of the role while *“learning new skills”*, and working out the answers to *“thought provoking questions”* while *“assisting people to achieve their goals”*.

- Flexible

When asked why they had chosen this type of teaching, the comments were very similar with the majority of tutors agreeing that the flexibility of time and place of work offered opportunities related to income in that they can *“stay at home with the children while still earning”*, *“travel and still be employed”*, *“study without financial implications”* and *“earn extra income”*.

- Continuous learning

Other tutors welcomed the opportunity to *“be involved in teaching without the issues of being in the classroom”* and to *“be semi-retired but still involved in education”* along with an ability to be *“kept informed of the latest trends and developments in education”* and to be able to *“work with adults instead of children”*. The final comments suggest an interest in lifelong learning with tutors wanting to *“expand on my IT skills”*, *“challenge my own abilities”* and to *“develop a pathway to academia.”* It also offered *“opportunities to access current academic resources such as professional journals”*.

### The challenges of online learning

- Large numbers

Tutors were in agreement that the role was not without its challenges with the large groups of 75 students having an impact on many aspects of the work with the marking of assignments being a common problem area with many comments such as: *“the day to day aspect of the job is great, but there is a sudden increase in workload around marking time”*; *“marking such large numbers in the required time frame while ensuring that I provide quality feedback is a constant issue”*; *“marking is all consuming”*; *“the volume of marking means many hours of unpaid work”*; and *“marking is always such a challenge”*.

- Overcoming distance

Tutors were also concerned about the distance factor for both staff and students with feelings of *“being alone”*, *“isolation”* and *“trying to overcome the distance factor to ensure that each student feels special”*. Distance also means time differences that can have an impact in *“maintaining the discussion”*, *“keeping students motivated”* as well as causing problems in *“ensuring that students continue to engage”*. Tutors found some difficulty in *“keeping discussions live, when students are posting at different times”*.

- Work-life balance

Time management was an aspect of concern for many. Common responses were: *“I spend many hours developing relationships with my students”*; *“the hours of work impact on my family life”*; and *“I have to work hard to ensure that the workload does not encroach on family time”*. Tutors felt that that it is a *“constant battle to support students without spreading myself too thin”* and feeling that *“while I want to support my students, I have a family who want my attention too”*. One tutor explained that although she had to set time aside each day

to respond and support students it was also essential to *“compartmentalize the job so that it doesn't become all time consuming”*.

- Feedback demands

Tutors were agreed that the balance between giving students the amount of feedback that they wanted and the realities of the job were hard to maintain when *“students want instant feedback”*. One tutor explained that it was not unusual for students to send several emails over the weekend *“demanding tutor attention”*. She felt that some of these students can make the job *“very stressful”* with *“really unreasonable expectations”*. It was also agreed that many students are very *“needy”* and often appear not to read the posts or unit materials, preferring to *“email the tutor direct for an instant response”*. Tutors felt a constant need to remind students to take their questions and issues to the discussion board. The dilemma for the tutors was to do this in ways that ensured that students felt *“supported”* and *“encouraged”* and also in ways that encouraged inactive students to engage.

## Interaction and Engagement

Tutors were asked to share their understandings regarding ‘interaction’ and any significant issues. The majority of tutors felt that engaged students were successful students and that a large part of their work involved finding ways to ensure that engagement is established and then maintained.

All five groups responded similarly, commenting that *“interaction equates with success”*, and that *“the more students interact, the more understanding they will have of the content”*. Related to this viewpoint, many tutors also commented that interactions should be measured and rewarded in the form of marks for participation. Similar comments were *“participation on the discussion board should be worth at least 5%”* and *“if they have not interacted they have missed the plot and if we gave marks that would keep them on the board”*. One group felt that the interactions could be *“peer assessed with the evaluations earning one or two marks”*.

It appears that for the teaching of pre-service teachers in an online environment, for this particular group of tutors, there were three interlinked areas of interaction: interactions between the tutors; interactions between the students; and interactions between the tutors and their students. Perhaps because these tutors were involved in a range of units, there was an overall feeling that underpinning all of these interactions was the notion of the professional culture of teaching.

- Tutor interactions

It is recognised that the role of online tutor can be a lonely one and that it is essential that tutors feel supported. Within this online B. Ed degree there are three areas that offer tutor support:

1. Four training days are offered each year where tutors work together in a collaborative learning environment;
2. A blackboard site offers tutor training packages of interactive learning modules;
3. Every blackboard unit has a ‘tutor lounge’ that is only available for tutors working in that particular unit. This lounge is used as an avenue to ask questions of the unit coordinator and of one another to clarify issues, offer support in areas of concern and moderate student work.

The tutors discussed their ideas around these opportunities. They agreed that being together in a learning community was very powerful in that *“I love these training sessions, I always come away feeling energised with some new ideas”*, and *“I learn something new each time I come to a training session”*, along with *“I can see us all improving each time we meet up. I love being part of such a large group of people striving to improve what we do”*.

They agreed that isolation was an issue to overcome. *“Getting us all together is so important. It can be very lonely out there. Collaboration is such an important aspect”*. Supporting this notion, *“It is great to have opportunities to share with more experienced people. I know that I can feel comfortable to ask anything”*.

- Peer interactions

Tutors reported that they believed the development of peer-to-peer interaction to be an important aspect of the job, but that it was not always easy to achieve. Their students often have busy lives outside of study and need to be shown engagement as an important asset to their learning. It is not about responding to emails.

Many of my students just want a quick fix answer and want to get me to always respond to them by email. I work hard to encourage them to share on the discussion board. I try to stress the importance of contribution as a tool to learning.

They have to learn that it is not about feeding them the answers

Needy students seem to not want to be active participants. They don't realize that always getting the answer from me is not going to help with real understanding. If I can't get them active on the board, they stay needy students and are unlikely to be successful.

One of the tutors with a background in high school teaching felt that many of his students reminded him of some of his school students in that *"they are often too quick to say 'I don't understand'. They don't take the time to read things through or to practise pulling out the information that is there"*. He felt that they needed to be encouraged to take the time to see what others are saying and to respond to that. He believed it was necessary to develop a *"culture that involves giving and taking constructive criticism from their fellow students"*. One tutor believed that *"For those students who have difficulty articulating their thoughts"* it was essential that she *"try to encourage a supportive, safe environment"*. This was strengthened by a need for students to *"demonstrate understanding and realize that it is not about regurgitation. Conversing with their peers is how they will get to this understanding"*. Another tutor recognized interaction as an avenue of supporting and developing his students who did not have English as their first language with *"the ESL students really benefit from conversing online. They discover that other students support them and correct them"*. It was suggested that opportunities need to be created that are more like an on campus workshop where the conversation is on going and everyone *"jumps in when they want to contribute"*. In this way students are able to *"feed off one another's ideas and develop"*. However, because students and tutors operate within different time frames around Australia as well as overseas, it was agreed that asynchronous discussion was not particularly conducive to student to student collaboration, with many tutors stating that they were investigating ways of creating synchronous opportunities for engagement.

- Links to the professional culture

Some tutors felt that *"teachers are only part of the learning"* and therefore *"those students who engage with one another on the discussion board develop skills in collaborating around the content"*. This group also believed that these *"collaborative skills would be essential in the development of professional attitudes and behaviours"*. They felt that if teachers did not *"learn to work in teams while they were studying"*, then they may well *"struggle when they had to be part of a school team"*. As part of their professional development that had to learn to *"take feedback"* and to *"develop professional skills"*.

Teaching is a culture...and they have to understand what this means. When they collaborate on a discussion board with peers who come with a range of experiences this supports the development for them. It can't always be got out of a text book. They have to learn to bounce around their ideas to come to a shared understanding of the issues. This is what they will need to do in the school setting.

It was felt that some students wanted *"spoon fed"*, and that this was not a good way to develop the independence that they would need to demonstrate as teachers.

They have to learn to work out what is being asked of them and develop strategies for problem solving. I keep throwing it back to them. 'When you are responsible for a group of 30 children, there will be no one to ask how do I do this'. They need to start working out how to do things for themselves.

- Interactions between students and tutor

Several tutors highlighted areas of concern around how best to relate to and support their students. *"I feel that many of the first year students needed a lot of tutor guidance before they can be successfully engaged"*. *"They need so much help with interpretation...and need so much direction"*. *"Some students are so nervous of technology that it holds them back"*. *"...they just want everything handed to them... ..they need to learn to*

*keep to guidelines and the repercussions of not doing so”.*

Tutors discussed ideas of what it should look like and gave some common responses agreeing that the newer students were the ones who probably needed the most support.

It is not about feeding answers...it should be about trying to create a workshop setting where everyone feels comfortable about ‘jumping in’....give fewer choices to students in the beginning...and increase the choices as confidence grows... they have to learn to work together...contribute and complement one another...learn to take constructive criticism.

One tutor explained that often it was not anyone’s fault that the interaction was not as successful as it might be because sometimes the tasks that students are asked to do “*mitigate against quality interaction*”. He was supported in this by a range of responses. “*The tasks need to encourage interaction rather than just posting ideas about something*”. “*We need to be offering more open ended tasks...asking them to work out what is the best way*”. “*...make professional judgements...use of Bloom’s taxonomy*”. “*...bringing it back to how this might work in the classroom*” and “*...I like to give examples of what I did in the classroom*”.

A number of tutors also felt that the LMS set up was not conducive to the interactive process with “*too many posts taking too long to read*” and forums being too “*cumbersome*”. One tutor felt that perhaps in the “*maze of posts*” some important messages get missed. He felt that as an on campus tutor, the relaying of important information was more successful in that

You stand out in front of the class and tell them, ‘this is important information’ and generally they sit up and pay attention. It is much trickier on line, and I have no real way of knowing if my message has been heard or understood.

It was also felt by some that clicking between discussion board threads was “*clunky and not user friendly*”. Although tutors have the opportunity to create discussions boards to their own preferences it was felt that “*the set format impacted on opportunities for innovations*” that they might want to experiment with. It was also felt that perhaps many tutors actually expect more collaboration than many students are able to give in that

The equivalent face to face cohort attend a two hour class for each of their units, and do not have much engagement out of that time. Whereas the online students are expected to be online several days of each week, and if they are not, we are sending out emails asking them where they are. Perhaps this is an unreasonable expectation.

Some tutors believed that there could be a problem with mixed messages and that perhaps the OUA marketing team was giving students a different message about online learning than the reality presented in that

When we look at the adverts it suggests that students can study ‘anywhere’ at ‘any time’ and take however long they like. When they get here they discover that it is not as flexible as they think. We have timelines, deadlines and expectations. Some of them find that really hard to deal with and they are not ready to commit to the amount of active participation that we expect from them.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Universities place a high priority on positive student experiences. These experiences are enriched by a sense of connection with the university as well as with fellow students. The building of a sense of belonging is important in fostering and enhancing engagement. However, engagement in a learning community is not always considered in positive terms. It can be thought of as just another chore to complete within a busy student’s working life. To increase the likelihood of positive student engagement, both with their university and with one another, it is important to have teaching staff who understand how best to support and develop students through the use of a range of effective online teaching and learning strategies. This study is part of PhD research that



investigates the online practices within a Bachelor of Education degree. This particular research investigated the beliefs and practices of the online tutors who are involved in the teaching of this degree. Several areas were identified.

It was generally agreed that tutors felt supported in their role, and valued the opportunities for collaboration and improvement of practice. Like most jobs, the work of an online tutor has plusses and negatives. Although tutors are able to work from home having flexible hours and conditions, they can have problems in separating work from home. For some, there appears to be difficulty in stopping the work life from taking over the home life. Because of an expectation of continuous engagement by students, there is also the expected continuous engagement of tutors with the marking of student work being a particularly stressful and all consuming period of at least four weeks out of each study period. Although most tutors agreed that interaction by students was conducive to success, there were some problems identified in how to encourage and maintain engagement that was of a high quality. Part of the dilemma was in the linking of theories to classroom and school practices while developing understanding around the culture of the profession of teaching.

The role of online tutor is an important one that demands attention. When Oliver and Shaw (2003) compared asynchronous discussions with and without tutor presence, they reported that the only contextual element that appeared to significantly influence engagement was the tutor (cited in Vlachopoulos & Cowan, 2010). Garrison and Anderson (2003) argue for a strong “teaching presence” in online discussions. The quality of the tutors, and therefore their training, is an essential component of this online degree. It requires on going monitoring, development and sharing of good practice to ascertain which strategies maximize the learning opportunities for students. It is important to investigate how tutors make daily decisions that impact on learning. Further research and continued investigation is required to gain further understanding into how tutors are developing and what further support is required to assist this development.

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