

A Good Practice Framework for E-learning



Grundtvig 2: ESOFEL Project Effective Strategies for Open, Flexible E-learning

A Framework for Effective Online Tutoring

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This 11 point framework applies to the full range of possible online tutoring activities. The roles required by e-tutors are dependent upon the overall aims and objectives of the learning programme. In facilitating e-learning, the tutor has a range of hardware and software tools available to support online learning.

By e-learning, this framework refers to a pedagogical method that involves delivering a course of learning within a digital, interactive environment. There is interaction between tutors and learners via online, social networking platforms. E-learning should be considered as a “blended” methodology. It is neither face to face learning nor electronic, distance learning. It involves the development of a digital community that requires participation from its members.

In addition to the essential components for facilitating online learning, the e-tutor should possess competence in the following:

- Knowledge of the subject-matter;
- Understanding of pedagogical methodology;
- Information and communications technology.

1. Planning

The first component is to determine how online tutoring can best add value to the learning experience. Consideration should be made as to why a course is to be delivered as e-learning. The chosen methodology should be relevant to the needs of the learner. Learning only occurs within an environment in which the learner may interact with content, knowledge or skills. A planning team, design, technical and subject specialist should select the most appropriate tools and methods for online tutoring, taking into account:

- the hardware, software and network bandwidth available both at the provider end and to individual learners, wherever they will access the course;
- the nature of the learning outcome;
- the preferences of learners.

Budget for the cost of online tutoring, taking into account:

- the amount of tutor time involved;
- the hardware, software, connection costs and technical support required;
- marketing issues; the final cost to be levied at the learner.

2. Virtual Environment

The second component of e-learning is to identify appropriate virtual environments. This should take into account the technical capacity and the policy and procedures of the organisation. Where applicable:

- software to support email, discussion boards and e-conferencing;
- domain name or location within an existing domain;
- web hosting facilities;
- a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) providing 'virtual classrooms';
- the hardware capacity to host online learning content;
- the capacity of technical support to manage and maintain VLE.

A virtual environment provides a focal point for information about the course, including, where relevant:

- course information for learners;
- details of the programme;
- calendar of events;
- web links and reading lists;
- access to online study materials.

3. Online learning materials

Learning materials that are functional in real classrooms, do not readily transpose to virtual learning environments. It is essential that consideration is made to how learners will comprehend information and tasks from a distance. Without the immediacy of face-to-face interaction, readings or activities that over-stretch learners are likely to create a barrier to progression. The issues to consider in developing online learning content are:

- information should be created in a format that can be readily downloaded and/or printed;
- all learning objects must be created in a format that requires the minimum of additional software downloads or plug ins;
- consideration must be made to the bandwidth of the internet network being used by both the server and learners in selecting materials;
- learning material should be written in a style that recognises the learner will be reading alone;
- learning materials should have a corresponding learning activity, to enable learners to absorb and simulate the subject.

4. Establishing relationships with learners

The e-tutor should approach the task of establishing relationships with e-learners in much the same way as forming a traditional, face to face class. In forming the learning environment, the tutor and learner must acquire an understanding of the roles and dynamics of the learning process. The e-tutor should compile a personal profile of new learners, to establish an understanding of who the learner is and what his/her needs will be. Factors to consider:

- basic personal details - name, age, gender;
- educational and career background;
- prior knowledge and understanding of the course subject;
- personal and/or social constraints; eg. family, work, health, location;
- personal aims and goals;
- ICT competence;
- preferred learning styles;
- timeframe to complete course of study;
- time planning for study;
- level of support they require.

The e-tutor should provide new learners with some personal details of their own:

- establish a rapport, offer basic details, background and experience that will help add a human touch to the relationship;
- description of the support role offered as an e-tutor;
- contact details (off-line as well as online).

Establish a 'learning contract' with new learners to clarify what each can reasonably expect of the other:

- anticipated time and effort required by the learner for the course;
- learners contribution to group activities and assignments;
- what support the learner can expect from you as a tutor;
- methods that will be used for communication;
- the rules for communication - times of day, frequency of communication, response times;
- how technical problems should be resolved;
- how learner's progress will be assessed;
- procedures for absence, sickness or other unforeseen events;
- consequences of the learner failing to abide by the learning contract;
- complaints procedure; actions a learner may take if dissatisfied by tutor or course.

5. Using Email

Emails are the appropriate medium for private communication between tutor and learner. E-tutors should compile the email addresses of all learners and organise these into an address group, set up folders to store incoming and outgoing emails to/from learners. It is feasible to develop templates for frequently-used responses. However it is important that templates can be adapted to ensure each learner obtains an individualised response.

They respond to emails from learners within a timeframe identified in the learning contract. If either the tutor or learner are unable to maintain the timescale, this should be acknowledged and communicated.

E-tutors obey the rules of 'netiquette' and help learners to do likewise.

6. Communicating with learners

To create a virtual community, communicating effectively between the e-tutor and learners is crucial. The dialogue is the vital element of the learning process. It is through interaction with others that learning occurs. Without effective communication, the course is simply electronic, distance learning. The isolation of the learner is to be avoided.

Effective communication between tutor and learners should contain the following elements:

- clear and concise language, avoiding overuse of terminology and jargon
- avoiding sexism, racism, ageism or other discriminatory behaviour
- with empathy, using a friendly, non-patronising tone
- conform to the rules of 'netiquette'

In asynchronous group discussions - discussion boards, or blogs:

- the e-tutor should initiate topics to stimulate dialogue;
- establish the rules of communication, including the procedure for making a contribution ;
- encourage learners to discuss with one another;
- manage discussions that stray off subject, and encourage learners to maintain relevance to the course;
- act immediately against any misuse of the facility; eg flaming, bullying, gossip, promoting personal issues, breach of confidentiality, promoting criminal activity, etc.
- review discussion platforms regularly; delete inappropriate dialogue as soon as possible;
- summarise outcomes at each stage of the discussion.

In synchronous group discussions – chatrooms, tele-conferencing:

- establish a timetable for discussions; offer optional online tutorial times;
- identify learning goals for the discussion;
- establish the protocol and rules of communication - the use one to one messaging, making a contribution;
- the e-tutor should retain control of tutorial discussions;
- encourage all learners to contribute to discussion;
- encourage enthusiastic learners not to dominate discussion;
- prevent the discussion from straying away from the theme;
- prevent any learners from breaking the rules;
- summarise outcomes at each stage of the discussion.

7. Promoting learner activity

The next key component is to establish a study programme that integrates all components of the course; eg. self-study, research, assignments, group activities, etc. Ensure that this programme is flexible enough to cater for differing learning styles. E-tutors should set challenging yet achievable goals for the completion and quality of coursework. Respond flexibly and in a timely manner to emergent learner needs by, for example:

- initiate discussion topics;
- organise group activities;
- set assignments;
- provide additional study materials or other sources of expertise;
- promote confidence in learners' ability by offering praise and encouragement;
- if required, chase learners where action is expected but has not happened;
- when learners are in difficulty, offer assistance and if necessary, revise plans for completing the course;
- recognise and acknowledge the achievements of learners.

8. Assessing learning

The assessment component is dependent upon the nature and complexity of the course. The e-tutor must select assessment methods such as tests, simulations and assignments that adequately evidence successful achievement of learning outcomes.

The principle advantage of online assessment is flexibility - the delivery of assessment on demand. Rather than wait for a pre-determined date and time to join other candidates at a public exam centre, students can do an individualised online test as soon as they feel ready.

Electronically marked and based on multiple choice, the results of the tests can be fed back immediately to let individuals see their weaknesses and their strengths. Where possible, take steps to authenticate learner assessments, i.e. to ensure that responses to assignments and tests come from the learners themselves. To promote security, learners may be given unique identification numbers. Test papers downloaded from official websites or servers can be created to prevent them being stored on the learner's PC or forwarded to another. Once submitted, it is essential learners are provided with specific and timely feedback on their performance.

9. Administrative support

E-learning provision requires the back up of effective administration, to provide support to the course. E-tutors and learners should have access to learning records, including:

- register of new learners, eg. contact details, record of interaction, record of achievement, security access,;
- arrange learners into groups/classes;
- organise times for synchronous events, eg. chatroom tutorials;
- e-portfolio records, where applicable.

10. Technical support

The biggest weakness of e-learning is it is wholly dependent upon technology. If there is a breakdown with either hardware or software, the learner is deprived of access to the course and cannot proceed. Technical support must be ready to hand to ensure effective learning and to:

- resolve ad-hoc technical queries quickly and effectively;
- minimise the need for individualised technical support by developing lists of answers to frequently asked questions;
- offer real-time, online lessons in using course software, using conferencing software;
- provide direct responses to subject matter queries, where you have expert knowledge that is not available in any other way to the learner;
- refer learners to existing online materials, books, web sites and other sources and help them to develop the skills to locate similar information for themselves in future.

11. Evaluate learning

Like all learning programmes, e-learning should be adequately evaluated. Feedback from learners with regard to the online tutoring should be received. E-tutors should review the experience of learners to determine where online tutoring has been a success or where delivery should be amended to improve the course.

An online evaluation form should be devised, to enable learner feedback to be received economically and effectively. A multiple choice survey with radio-control buttons enables automatic reports to be compiled. In addition, there should be scope for learners to post personal comments and suggestions.

There should be a record of time spent on tutoring and compare the results with the budget.

Programme developers should analyse evaluation data; plan for and participate in development activities pedagogical and technical issues as well as the specific competencies of the e-tutor. This framework should be viewed as a cycle, where the evaluation process forms part of 1 – Planning component.