**Dealing with Problem Centred Scenarios**

**Towards an inventory of Best Practice...**

By the students of the SVC Module 2012.

How can we increase the levels of student interaction online, increase student participation rates, and facilitate purposeful and meaningful exchange of ideas online? These were the main themes of the problem centred scenarios.

**SCENARIO 1:**

Some very useful pointers for the role of the online tutor are emerging from this scenario, with Debbie, Hugh and Enda choosing this one to engage with. Firstly it is key to find out what the problem with student non-participation is. Early on, the putting of the student at ease would seem significant. As was highlighted, do we have enough background info online on the students to begin with? One of the things the tutor can do to compose an initial message solely to this hesitant student in a series of short questions to draw out more information from them and be in a better position to take subsequent action. Allied to this, is the notion of student motivation to learn; if we have enough background info on the students, this can help the tutor establish the personal significance of a topic posed for discussion. There is also this notion of trust and perceived anonymity and confidence for a student about one’s own knowledge about a topic in a public forum. Coupled with this, the level of formality required in the tutor postings is interesting – “setting a tone of (friendly) professionalism”, yet having a “high level of energy” in the postings is useful – importance of tutor posts being “non-threatening, having gentle persuasion, empathising with the student, keeping tone friendly, providing immediate feedback” – all good advice to follow! Tutor presence is important early on, and needs to be front-loaded. Keeping things lively from the start is great but challenging. To help with this, the use of a game and icebreakers for students to engage with at this early stage can pay dividends. Participation might also depend on how important the activity was for assessment or course purposes – e.g. is it an assessed activity where the student had to contribute to some online problem solving that was necessary before everyone could move on to the next activity? If so, then the tutor might need to be more directive or firm.

**SCENARIO 2:**

Angela gave us some excellent advice for this one – importance of creating a friendly environment e.g. in an induction, ask for a bio to be supplied by the student which allows the tutor to refer to a specific interest(s) of the student. Student postings – encourage them to start in a casual way first to get them used to posting. ‘Water cooler’ – useful to have an unmoderated space for students to socialise. Encourage students to help each other.

This scenario also dealt with the idea of lurkers (or read-only participators as they can be called). I liked your snapshot of lurkers from the literature Barry: workers, lurkers, shirkers. Have also heard it referred as “freeloaders, sponges and lurkers with issues!” Having the tutor model good online behaviour and providing clear expectations for the student are important, as well as having a good induction into using the various tools/media. Proficiency on achieving the right tone with such students comes with practice.

**SCENARIO 3:**

Mark gave some sound advice for this one on introducing a peer evaluation mechanism and drew down from one of the week 3 resources: ‘Managing teamwork online’. Other things to think about for this one can be allying yourself with the student as an opening stance – saying you know and understand their position; however there needs to be acknowledgement that some may be “begrudging participants” and again, like the last scenario, we may need to find out more before we can take a decision on it e.g. Is there a timeline set on replies? Are students aware of their responsibilities? Yet a key question that can be posed here is – while we can start off being nice and understanding, how would you respond if the behaviour persisted?

Some things we can try out if faced with this scenario - Include some questions in your posting to evoke directed reflection; include some advice on time management skills as organization is key to avoiding frustration e.g. *“proceed at your own pace, making contributions as and when you wish. Then, when you can find the time, you might go back to earlier threads on the discussion board to check whether others have responded to your posts”*; think about whether asychronous is the right medium of this topic or should it be in real-time? This involves awareness that asynchronous discussions have their own unique rhythm and opens up the need for variety in the tools we use and the need for knowledge about what topics are good for brainstorming in a chatroom and what need prolonged consideration in the boards e.g. a debate? It is important also to understand, appreciate and make the most of the diversity in any group of learners. Does our response depend on the nature of the learner? E.g. if it is a mature student that the tutor is dealing with, should we expect more from adults compared to if he/she were a typical, young undergraduate?

**SCENARIO 4:**

Odette and Nuala looked at this one. It is important for the student to able to access technology while travelling; the tutor also needs to consider the Learning Outcomes – what extent does the student need to engage in collaborative activities; is there a need for leniency? Place the student time commitment upfront and prominently in the course. Also can be important to encourage learner responsibility - I think this is a really interesting issue as even experienced teachers find it difficult to let go of hierarchical control, to trust their students. As online tutors, we have to be comfortable with many different student inquiries occurring simultaneously – this makes it very difficult to teach in the traditional way in which the teacher controls all the information students are accessing in a uniform way. In a knowledge-building class, you are never entirely certain where the inquiry will lead, how deep the study will go. Inherent here is a need to trust the students. We are also forced to admit that our own understanding of the material will be challenged as we realise we cannot and should not limit the inquiry based on our own comfort or understanding. Our role changes from ‘information provider’ to ‘co-learner’ in the community as we acknowledge the limits of our understanding. There is an interesting concept developing in the literature called contingent control – where the teacher is ready to exploit the student idea when it arrives and our preparation is often playing catch-up to the students, a kind of just-in-time lesson planning. Finally it would also be important to clarify the reason for the extension request. In terms of ‘what next’ after this post - Keeping track of Jane’s access to the VLE and her contributions can be done by the tutor through the tracking tool which as we have seen on the module (thanks Kevin!) throws up a number of stats.

**SCENARIO 5:**

By far the most popular choice for exploration with Jim, Clare, Steve and Nuala all sharing their thoughts: a work/life/study balance is needed; best to check in 3 times a day even if only for a short time; setting virtual office hours; think of all the elements being asked of a student - whether it involves reading the task, researching it and engaging in online dialogue with peers.

The main theme here was the shifts in academic staff demands; there certainly are increased workload demands placed on staff teaching online (perceived availability of staff teaching in a 24/7 environment); the continuous open nature of the virtual classroom raises a host of questions surrounding the time investment for online classes: the frequency of tutor interactions, the timing of these interactions and a tutor’s availability to students.

**I have added in some ideas here that may be of use in the future:**

Let’s think about what the virtual classroom is, say over a 4 week module like this where Tuesday-Monday was our virtual online classroom:

* The tutor has high demands on Mondays – with a focus on providing formative feedback/summaries of the previous week’s work; releasing the upcoming week’s activities and resources.
* Work week shifts to accommodate student’s work – Sunday, Monday and Tuesday are busiest, giving feedback to students, finishing activities at the end of the week.

Once you have established your own online tutoring timeframe like this, let’s think about how best to refocus tutor time, and I would recommend each of you doing this for your own future online courses.

**Create an online management plan**

* Outline your peak days of the week
* Determine the peak hours of each day
* Identify dedicated time for assessment (if required) [for info, 2009 US research shows on average online tutors spend 3-4 hours grading online discussions]
* Identify dedicated time for discussion participation
* Identify and post days/times for which you will be unavailable
* Create a list of external sources which you’d like to incorporate into the discussion (prior to the start of the course)
* Identify two communication modes for which to utilise in the course discussion (i.e. audio posts, written posts)

Here is a SAMPLE PLAN (PER COURSE) that you can use, and feel free to adapt it as appropriate:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Peak Days (highest student interaction)** | **Dedicated time: grading** | **Dedicated time: discussion** | **Down time (specified time you will not be available)** | **External resources** |
| Monday |  |  |  |  |
| Wednesday |  |  |  |  |
| Friday |  |  |  |  |

Consider your Peak Days:

* Which days of the week are students most engaged with online discussion in your course?
* Why are these the peak days for your students? Day before hand-in date! Normally Sundays - non traditional students complete online courses for flexibility as they have a work week to contend with
* Do the peak days co-ordinate well for you and your students?
* Do you have any oversight to realign peak days or are they beyond your control?
* How might you best utilise the peak days in the discussion?

Finally, don’t forget to consider ‘Downtime’:

* What days are least critical for participation?
* What days need protection in your timetable/schedule?
* What days are most needed for active participation to ensure effective facilitation and prompt feedback for students?

An important question that all tutors should be able to answer with regards to their online tutoring commitment is:

* How much time would you spend in the online class each week?

US research shows that 2-10 hours is the average - how manageable is this with all your other f2f responsibilities?

* Are you in your online time beyond the 9-5pm workday?

Again, recent US research says that the majority is yes – so this begets the question, how do you best manage your time in a virtual 24/7 environment?

We have moved towards identification of a number of **best practices for facilitating online discussions**:

* pose discussable questions, problems or situations
* teach students how to participate in an online discussion
* contribute intellectual content and insight to ongoing discussions
* incorporate audio, video case studies, simulations, guest speakers, role playing or exploratory prompts to enliven threaded discussions
* utilise discussion scaffolding to lead students through higher-order learning
* utilise a rage of questions to encourage active processing of course material

In terms ofdedicated discussion time, can be useful for the tutor to consider:

* How will you participate in discussion boards? (as an equal with students? more passively to let the discussion unfold among the students? to interject a new idea or resource? to direct the conversation? to play ‘devil’s advocate?)
* How can the tutor frame the discussion? With current events, case studies, website reviews, journal critiques, controversial topics, chapter reviews?
* How does the tutor elaborate, expand upon and synthesise information from the discussion? Weekly summaries, additional resources (some studies call for online tutors to be cybrarians/topical experts), invited guest speakers etc?

Reflective Questions Emerging from the Student-led Webinar:

Would these approaches work better with undergraduate students or is this more rational for an adult learning environment?

Do the better quality postings often come from late entrants to a discussion thread and by allowing more time on an activity with no interim deadlines?