RESPONSE TO STUDENT CONSULTATION ON WHAT MAKES AN ONLINE LEARNING EVENT AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

SUMMARY

This is a response to the consultation on what makes an online learning event (tutorial) an effective learning experience which took place between and 04 October and 17 October 2021 on the Psychology and Counselling Board of Studies consultation forum. The student feedback is at
https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=25045

Undergraduate psychology and counselling students were invited to participate. At least 147 engaged with the forum; 72 students posted a total of 209 posts and students used 67 likes and favourites on the posts of peers. Discussion threads included open questions around why students choose to attend online learning events, what they find valuable and what the best tutorials include, what makes them feel supportive, what the events on their last module were like and what those in their first year were hoping the events would be like as well as a thread asking for any other comments.

Key points include that online tutorials are valued despite/because of their difference to face-to-face events. They allow greater flexibility, are the only achievable option for many and the opportunity for learning and the sense of belonging experienced by many in engaging in learning alongside other students is valued. Meeting tutors makes later contact with them easier, and use of the camera even briefly enhances the sense of a working relationship with a person. The tutor's success in establishing a supportive and inclusive environment, in carefully preparing and designing for interaction, in ensuring important parts of the tutorial aren't rushed, in using the online rooms competently, and inviting student contributions all matter. Students want opportunities to raise questions and receive answers throughout a session. Two tutors in a session ensures engagement with the students through the chatbox discussions and serves to mitigate against audio and connection issues that may arise. The high variability in the quality of tutorials was noted and the students were thoughtful and generous with suggestions to improve this. There are slightly different views on what the content of tutorials should include and a request to consider the point of each session in planning them.

This forms part of a broader project to improve the learning experience in online tutorials. The insight offered is to inform tuition strategies, to underpin tutorial observations and feed into related staff development of Associate Lecturers (ALs) around developing and delivering online learning events (tutorials). This feedback is currently being used by the lead for Psychology & Counselling on AL staff development in developing a strategy for training and to inform the revision and development of tutorial observation in the school.

Input from this forum regarding the value of seeing tutors on camera – even briefly – helped the Learning Experience and Technology team in the development of new default layouts for online rooms which make camera usage easier. These are now in trial and will be the default on Psychology & Counselling modules from October 2022 (22J).

Some points raised regarding audio issues and tutor competence using Adobe Connect will be shared in the March meeting of the cross-university Online Rooms Working Group.

This feedback will be included in the Board of Studies meeting in May. Suggestions which require consideration by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) team responsible for overall tuition policy will be discussed with that team. The feedback will also be presented to a meeting of the Psychology & Counselling Staff Tutors in March. Staff tutors work on module tuition strategies and timetabling and are the academic managers of the Associate Lecturers so they are responsible for the observation of teaching practice and giving feedback and support to tutors in their ongoing development.

Moderators: Paige Cuffe (Lecturer, Staff Tutor), Nancy Rowell (Associate Lecturer)

FULL RESPONSE

The richness of student responses across the threads helps us to understand that the elements of their tutorial experience are entwined and not always easily or meaningfully examined separately. Further, the interaction between these and a student's individual situation and needs is also explained by students in posts across various threads. For this reason, several themes have been constructed across threads to organise the OU responses and/or next steps in the tables below.

What makes online tutorials valuable and why students attend	OU response / next steps
Students value having online tutorials available and the flexibility that the range of dates and times offer. Many find these an essential tutorial option to accommodate their needs arising from a disability, caring responsibilities, travel time to face to face venues and work responsibilities. For students living with ill health and disabilities, the ability to participate as much or as little as they can, and to be able to move and get comfortable is valued. Online tutorials are also the only option for students overseas. *Students request that online tutorials at a range of times continue when face to face provision resumes in the future.*	It is the policy of FASS to continue to provide online tutorials when face to face provision resumes, we will continue to timetable as many online options as possible. The importance of this option for many students - arising from different factors that interact to determine what they can undertake - will be shared with the FASS team who develop tuition policy.
Most students report enjoying discussions on what they are learning, a sense of community, of working alongside other students and of belonging. They also enjoy meeting tutors to aid developing a working relationship and would value more frequent tutorials and seeing tutors more often. They report that a good tutorial is energising and refreshing and helps gain confidence, particularly as tutors are mostly encouraging and helpful.	These insights will be shared with tutors through staff development events including in new tutor induction for October 2022 (22J). We will share this too with the Staff Tutor team who manage tuition and guide and support tutors. They will also be shared with new students to help them weigh up their decision whether to engage with online tutorials or not.
Students attend to consolidate their learning, check their understanding and keep on track.	
Students value hearing different approaches from different tutors, their personal tips and professional knowledge, find hearing questions from their peers useful, and value quick responses to questions within the session.	

The effects of the variable design and delivery of tutorials	OU response / next steps
Online tutorials can feel personal and give a sense of community. Tutorials achieve this when tutors are responsive to students throughout the tutorial, students interact with one another, and tutors interact with each other.	The importance of responsiveness and ongoing interaction will be incorporated in training for tutors.
Working alongside other students creates a sense of belonging, just being in the presence of students in a cluster where students can begin to recognise names. This familiarity made forum interaction easier. When tutorials have a large number of participants (30 or more) this is not achieved.	The importance of cluster and tutorial size in supporting this will be shared with the teams who manage the pattern of clusters and timetabling. This will be done ahead of October 2022 (22J) though changes may take longer to achieve.

Many students valued chatbox interaction with one another during the tutorial, while some found this overwhelming. Sometimes there needs to be a general chatbox and a Q&A chatbox for questions to the tutors. Very large numbers of students in a tutorial should be avoided as this was distracting or prevented meaningful interaction.

There should always be two tutors, one to present, the other to manage the chatbox.	This is the current policy in FASS for all cluster tutorials. We are pleased to hear this is beneficial; this will be conveyed to the relevant FASS team.
Use of whiteboard and polling activities which provide anonymity are described as inclusive and widely enjoyed.	It will be shared in future development of tutors that time should be allocated to meaningful interaction and the form of that interaction needs to be carefully considered during tutorial design. Tools (such as breakouts) should be used when needed to achieve a specific learning purpose and should be well prepared and managed, and that tools that provide anonymity are valued.
For some the use of breakout rooms is problematic and for many others discussing a question in breakout rooms provides effective learning and a sense of community. Well-designed breakout activities were more positively described.	
Tutorials were more effective when carefully designed and the time allocated to different parts is sufficient and time management during the tutorial ensures the more important sections aren't rushed. Time is also needed for students to read slides.	
Students commented that the purpose of each tutorial should be more carefully considered, many students called for less repetition of module materials in tutorials (particularly the copying and pasting of information from the website) even regarding assessments. Text heavy slides that are read out by some tutors without engaging with students was not enjoyable or useful. Tutorials are enriched when tutors share their own knowledge and experience.	All these points and suggestions will be considered in the guidance given to tutors and will be shared with the teams who manage tutors, tuition and timetabling.
Students receive contradictory guidance in different tutorials about the expectations in tutor marked assignments (TMAs) and how they are scored. To address this some suggested that the slides and recordings from all tutorials should be available to a cluster and some that even all tutorials on a module be available to everyone.	Practically, there are a very large number of cluster groups across the UK for each module and provision of this volume of recordings would not benefit student learning and might dramatically increase the pressure felt by many to view all available recordings. Ethically, we undertake to limit the access to a tutorial to those in a cluster or tutor group and students have good reasons for requiring limited sharing of a recording they participate in.
A further suggestion was that a single short recording setting out what is expected for a TMA and how it will be marked be available to the whole of the module – students and tutors.	This suggestion will be discussed with Staff Tutors at the meeting in March and taken to module teams to consider if a short empty-room recording for each TMA might improve this.
For many students the opportunity to ask questions in the moment and get a response is vital and questions can't be restricted to the end of the session. It is important to allow time for typing questions often, so that the presentation hasn't moved on before it can be raised.	We will include in training that distinct Q&A time is helpful if it occurs throughout the tutorial. We will include this in guidance to the staff tutors who observe and support tutor's teaching development.

The effects of the technology and confidently managing it	OU response / next steps
Students struggle with poor audio in tutorials, both live and recorded, and while many understood that the quality of internet connection during a tutorial might be the issue, they felt that the equipment and competence of tutors to address audio problems should be improved and problems sensibly managed. (When one tutor experiences audio or internet problems, the other tutor should take over presenting. When anyone is not talking they should mute their mic.)	We will make tutors aware of the importance of sound quality for your learning experience and the need to run sound checks before beginning and to upgrade equipment where needed.
Students noted that tutors often commented on problems with Adobe Connect, apparently even with sound and connectivity issues. For some students this caused a loss of confidence in the platform. Some students commented that newer programmes for online rooms should be considered.	The OU online rooms team regularly review other options to ensure we use the best choice for teaching and learning in our particular setting and for our scale. They work directly with the current provider to improve and develop Adobe Connect for our setting.

Accessibility, inclusivity and diversity	OU response / next steps
Receiving slides ahead of a tutorial is important; for some it reduces the stress of reading slides, for some it provided an opportunity to consider what questions they wanted to raise in the tutorial. Provision of slides ahead of the tutorial is not consistently taking place for students for whom it is part of the provision for their disability support. When this happens they are unable to contact the relevant tutors as the contact details of the scheduled tutors is not given on the Learning Event Management system (where ALs and students book tutorials).	The importance of this will be conveyed to tutors and to the academics who manage the different aspects of tuition provision including tutorials and tutors. It will be included in staff development particularly (but not exclusively) around improving accessibility of learning.
Some students valued seeing their tutors briefly on camera, with this making it feel easier to interact with the tutor as a person; many valued the use of mics by students too.	The importance of this has been considered in the creation of new layouts to make this easier to achieve during tutorials. These will be implemented in October 2022 (22J).

Conclusions

The complex interplay of aspects of tutorials (technical, quality of design, confident delivery and accessibility) helps us understand why students do attend and when it is or isn't a valuable learning experience. With having to use online tutorials since Covid-19, they have found them more convenient and many would now choose online tutorials in preference to face to face.

While students have different preferences and needs which are sometimes in tension with the needs of others, (such as whether a tutorial should involve student discussion or be information-giving about TMAs) there are areas of clear agreement. Tutorials are seen as an opportunity to consolidate knowledge, clarify understanding, hear other perspectives, and to discuss the topics deepen learning. By including too much content, much of it already available on the module website students noted that there was insufficient time for questions, discussions or applying the knowledge. Good tutorials paced so that students could keep up, focus on key concepts, discuss what they're looking for in TMAs and didn't cover too much content. Having slides before a tutorial supports the learning of many. Consistency in TMA expectations and advice is urgently needed.

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