Tutor experiences of online tutoring as a basis for the development of a focused tutor-training programme[1]

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ABSTRACT

Online tutorials (e-tutorials) have the potential to address challenges that higher education has grappled with for many years, and even more so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa, increased access to higher education by members of previously disadvantaged groups has caused severe strain on existing infrastructure and posed new challenges for lecturers in the classroom. E-tutorials do not only address infrastructure challenges related to the shortage of physical learning space in universities but also create a platform where students can engage with learning content outside the classroom. This study seeks to investigate the experiences of tutors engaged in an online tutorial programme at a rural university campus in South Africa. We deploy a qualitative approach to make sense of the experiences of the tutors for purposes of developing a focused online tutorial training programme. Data were gathered from selected participants using structured questionnaires. The questionnaires were analysed using the five stages of Salmon's e-moderating framework. The limitations of the study include the limited population sample and the rural context in which the study was conducted. As a result, the findings of the study may not be generalisable to other, non-rural contexts. The findings indicate that tutors need specific training to effectively facilitate learning in an online environment.

Keywords: e-tutorials, tutors' experiences, online tutor training

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Higher education institutions (HEIs) globally are faced with challenges of massification, student retention, large classes, and student engagement, and a lack of resources to accommodate rapidly increasing numbers of student enrolments (Jawitz, 2013; Ayeni & Oluwantoyin, 2016). In addressing these teaching and learning challenges, many HEIs, including those in South Africa, have resorted to online tutoring and blended learning approaches, depending on their needs. In South Africa's higher education sector, tutoring is perceived as a key strategy for facilitating student engagement (Faroa, 2017). However, for the purposes of this article, we focus specifically on online tutoring, which has the potential to transform old and open up new trajectories for teaching and learning in higher education, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online tutoring is different from traditional, face-to-face tutoring because it takes place in a virtual environment, and, therefore, it does not necessarily require physical infrastructure. Many

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HEIs around the world are gravitating towards online learning because of various contextual challenges which include, among others, limited venues, timetabling challenges and inadequate computer labs (Reimers, Schleicher, Saavedra & Tuominen, 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has also forced HEIs around the world to administer teaching and learning online (Dube, 2020; Govender, 2020) in order to ensure social distancing.

Broadly speaking, the online tutorial design falls into two categories, namely asynchronous and synchronous. Synchronous e-tutorials take place in real time, and students and tutors are expected to be online simultaneously (Sabatino, 2014). On the other hand, asynchronous e-tutorials do not take place in real time and students 'are able to work at a pace consistent with [their] rate of learning' (Sabatino, 2014: 23). While synchronous tutorials create a platform for students to learn from each other and receive feedback in real time, asynchronous tutorials give students more time to reflect and familiarise themselves with the learning process as well as to interact in ways that promote individual growth and self-intellectual enrichment (Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2017). In a study conducted in Nigerian universities, Ogbonna, Ibezim and Obi (2019) found that both approaches have varying benefits. However, the asynchronous approach resulted in better understanding of content among students than the synchronous approach.

The benefits and challenges of e-tutorials differ depending on the contextual circumstances of implementation. E-tutorials allow students to study in their own time, even in the comfort of their homes. They reduce timetable clashes, improve writing skills for both students and tutors, foster time-management skills, and develop communication and computer literacy skills as well as problem-solving and critical-thinking skills (MacDonald, 2008; Goold, Coldwell & Craig; 2010; Peacock & Cowan, 2016; Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2017). Bean et al. (2019: 3) state that 'online tutoring creates supplemental opportunities for students enrolled in all types of courses: face-to-face, hybrid, and online', while Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) intimate that e-tutorials are accessible at anytime and from anywhere, thus allowing for a more flexible and relaxed approach to learning. Chappell et al.'s (2015) study of the effects of e-tutorials on academically weak middle-school students found that online tutoring contributes to better student grades. Similarly, Vasquez and Slocum (2012) found that students who engaged in synchronous tutorials significantly improved their reading proficiency and communication skills.

Although e-tutorials have numerous advantages, especially in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, some scholars, such as Chi-Sing and Beverly (2008), argue that students require detailed guidance to manoeuvre in e-tutorials, and, if there is no guidance, that the tutorials may not be ideal for students who find it difficult to pay attention, lack self-discipline and communication skills, struggle with independence, or have poor computer and time-management skills. Online learning may cause social alienation due to a lack of social interaction (Hameed, Badii & Cullen, 2008). As a result, e-moderators should learn to use their skills to ensure that participants develop a sense of community in the medium (Salmon, 2004b).

Stenbom, Jansson and Hulkko (2016) identified three challenges of e-tutorials, namely (i) the tendency for tutors to lecture instead of probing students to think critically, (ii) not allowing student sufficient time to reflect on what was learned and (iii) the general tendency among students to read posts without replying (lurking). Bean et al. (2019) reported that e-tutors often find it challenging to control their emotions online while Salmon (2004b: 85) notes that 'helping trainee tutors to control their frustration is a key aspect of learning to learn online'. In asynchronous tutorials, students may take longer to respond, causing some participants to lose interest in e-tutorials. A lack of resources to undertake e-tutorials may also pose a challenge to the smooth running of e-tutoring.

Online learning is effective when participants socialise with each other, share experiences and exchange ideas; however, it is not uncommon for students to work in social isolation and shun collaboration with other students. Dixson (2010) affirms that student engagement is crucial in the process of student

learning, particularly in virtual learning environments where tutees can sometimes experience feelings of alienation and disassociation. Available literature seems to suggest that e-tutorials can either be successful or unsuccessful depending on the way e-tutors manage the online learning process. Against this background, the role of the tutor in an online tutoring environment is critical in achieving high levels of student engagement and success.

In the UK, Lowe, Mestel and Williams (2016) conducted a study on how mathematics and computer science students perceived e-tutorials. Results showed that the lack of technical knowledge and interest, limited internet access and low self-esteem in using online learning tools caused low participation. In the Chinese context, Feng, Xie and Liu (2017) found that timely feedback, provision of summaries after discussions, and commending and praising students can boost student engagement. Ahmad and Chua's (2015) study of the experiences of pre-service teachers in Malaysia revealed that, during online discussions, students were able to think critically and share ideas.

This study sought to answer two questions:

- How do e-tutors experience online tutoring at a rural university campus in South Africa?
- How can the experiences of e-tutors be harnessed to develop a focused e-tutor training programme?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although much has been written about new technologies and their potential, little has been written about the kind of training that e-tutors/lecturers require. Available literature focuses on the roles of tutors and the strategies they can use to facilitate online learning, but very little information is available on the actual training of online tutors (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Salmon, 2002; Rickard, 2004). Although increasing numbers of learners are working online, 'few lecturers have themselves learned this way, [thus], e-[tutoring] is not a set of skills most lecturers [tutors] have acquired vicariously through observing teachers whilst they themselves were learning' (Salmon, 2004: 56). Studies by Boylan, Bliss and Bohnam (1997) and Bernath and Rubin (2001) show that the success of an online tutoring programme depends on its tutor-training methods. In addition, Barker (2002) states that one of the most important skills required by online tutors is knowledge of the tool used to facilitate e-learning, namely the Learning Management System (LMS). E-tutors need to be familiar with specific tools within an LMS to enable students to interact effectively in a virtual environment. A lack of knowledge of how the system works is likely to frustrate both tutors and tutees. However, it is important to emphasise that e-learning is less about 'learning new software or computing skills' (Salmon, 2004: 56) than it is about learning to learn through virtual platforms.

Bernath and Rubin (2001) posit that untrained tutors may resort to practices that are highly detrimental to levels of engagement and success. Bean et al. (2019: 3) identified seven common competencies for successful online learning instructors namely, (i) ability to use technology, (ii) provision of timely and constructive feedback, (iii) communication and administrative skills, (iv) ability to deal with problems timeously, (v) monitoring the learning process, (vi) subject knowledge and (vii) supporting students in need. McFarlane (2016) further contends that tutors who are not trained become broadly confused and often indicate a lack of understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Many researchers are in agreement that e-tutors play an important role in virtual learning environments and that e-tutors require a set of specific and appropriate competencies in addition to their module and its content-specific knowledge (McPherson & Nunes, 2009).

Other researchers have noted that students who work together in face-to-face setups could work best in an online environment since they have built rapport among themselves, which could lead to better achievement of learning outcomes (Wright, D'Alba & Jones, 2016; Nathan, 2018). According to Karimi

(2016), there is a need to shift the focus of e-tutor training from training tutors how to deliver content to training tutors how to ask questions that help to keep the discussion alive and encourage students to think critically. Given the absence of human-to-human social contact in e-tutorials, it is important, when designing online tutor-training programmes, to consider how the online platform can simulate face-to-face social interactions. Social interaction can advance the learning process because knowledge is often shared through interaction. Engaging with a knowledgeable tutor can resolve unforeseen difficulties that emerge in the course of the online learning process.

O'Hare (2011) provides a guide that online tutors can use to ascertain whether students have the maximum opportunity to interact and engage effectively. Firstly, tutors ought to establish the purpose, context and intended outcomes of the tutorial. Secondly, students should be given adequate induction into the effective use of relevant tools on the discussion board. Thirdly, the topic of discussion and the learning outcomes should be connected so that students can appreciate the importance of the debate and what it seeks to achieve. Fourthly, feedback on the discussion should be given in the form of summarised posts that focus the learning on the desired outcomes. Lastly, the tutor should not allow a discussion to lose steam or get boring. When tutors see that the discussion has gone flat, they should immediately create a new discussion thread and steer the conversation in a new direction. O'Hare's (2011) study found that students need tutor guidance to interact with each other effectively. According to Salmon (2004b), the role of the e-moderator is to prompt, encourage and enable openness, thus creating a conducive environment for everyone to contribute. Similarly, Stickler and Hampel's (2007: 82) study on designing online tutor-training programmes reveals that providing 'technical training' to online tutors could possibly increase their self-esteem.

It is in light of this that we seek to investigate how tutor experiences can be appropriated to develop an effective online tutoring programme. Bjørke (2014) intimates that challenges faced by tutors on virtual platforms include a lack of discipline from the students and the fact that students prefer to be taught by lecturers rather than learning from their peers. In an exploratory study of challenges experienced by e-tutors, Joubert and Snyman (2017) found that e-tutors faced a number of challenges such as low participation and lack of commitment from the students, a sense of disassociation, inadequate training, unclear roles of e-tutors, and intermittent internet access. These challenges exist in many contexts where online learning takes place. McGuiness and Fulton (2019: 16) found that minority students faced technological glitches such as with internet connectivity and the inability to navigate the relevant tools. This was also confirmed by Loh, Wong, Quasi and Kingshott (2016), who singled out flexibility as the pillar for online learning. According to Dube (2020), some of the challenges experienced by learners in rural areas in South Africa include the high cost of data to connect to the internet as well as power outages that affect network connection. However, some scholars have also identified a lack of motivation on the part of students as a major challenge. Motivation determines the level of engagement that can be expected from students. Given that a lack of motivation can be detrimental to the learning process (Hartnett, 2016), Davis et al. (2019) suggest that motivation can be maintained by not letting go of personal interaction between teachers and students. Other researchers suggest that 'students may require adaptive motivation to stay engaged' (Francis, Wormington & Hulleman, 2019: 3).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts Salmon's five stages of e-moderation as a theoretical framework to understand how the experiences of e-tutors can be appropriated to curate a focused, online tutor-training programme. Salmon's framework is based on social constructivist theories that postulate that knowledge is created by individuals through their own experiences and with the support of their cognitive framework (Salmon, 2007). Social constructivism sees learning as 'an active process in which learners engage with and build new ideas or concepts based upon their current or past knowledge' (Salmon, 2007: 39). The

theory asserts that learners can construct knowledge and learn through social interactions with their peers, but that they must engage in an authentic task and have meaningful conversation about the task or topic (Reigeluth et al., 2017). Group work and discussion can facilitate this process and put this theory into practice (Majola, 2020). Salmon's e-moderating framework is 'a structured developmental process' (Salmon, 2002: 10) that consists of five stages, namely (i) access and motivation, (ii) online socialisation, (iii) information exchange, (iv) knowledge construction and (v) personal development (Salmon, 2002, 2004). The first stage (access and motivation) involves the initial processes of interacting with e-learning technologies, such as setting up the computer, logging in and gaining access to the system. At this stage, the responsibility of the e-moderator is to welcome and encourage participants to interact and ensure that the system is ready for use (Salmon, 2004).

The second stage (online socialisation) involves interaction among participants as they send and receive messages. At this stage, the responsibility of the e-moderator is to familiarise themselves with the student body and provide links between cultural, social and learning environments (Salmon, 2004). The e-moderator should also encourage participants to 'identify and share their own beliefs and values, and acknowledge that they are different from those of others', thus developing 'a sense of community in the medium' (Salmon, 2004: 66) among the participants. In the third stage (information exchange), participants search and personalise the relevant software while the e-moderator facilitates tasks and supports the use of learning materials. 'Information exchange' refers to the sharing of information which is possible when e-moderators/tutors facilitate small groups using collaborative, active learning strategies that ensure scaffolding of the learning material (Tshuma, 2012; Salmon, 2004). E-moderators should avoid information overload by reading and responding only to what is important.

In the fourth stage (knowledge construction), participants construct new knowledge by sharing experiences on the online platform. The role of the e-moderator/tutor at this stage is to facilitate the knowledge construction process by probing, redirecting and changing the direction of the discussion, a process that is often referred to as 'weaving'. Weaving 'describes the flow of discussion and how it can be pulled together', often by 'collecting statements and relating them to concepts and theories from the course' (Salmon, 2004: 67-68) Salmon's idea of 'knowledge construction' underscores the social constructivist view that knowledge is generated in social interaction. Therefore, it is important for discussions to culminate in the building and sharing of expertise between e-tutors and tutees (Salmon, 2004). Knowledge construction occurs when participants explore issues, take positions, discuss their positions in an argumentative format, and reflect on and re-evaluate their positions (De Smet et al., 2008). At stage five (personal development), the e-moderator's role is to provide links outside the closed-conference setup while participants 'start to build on the ideas acquired through the e-tivities and apply them to their individual contexts' (Salmon, 2004: 33). At this stage, participants also develop metacognitive skills, and the e-moderator can take advantage of this to develop more challenging e-tivities.

Ultimately, stage five (personal development) is concerned with the academic growth of students, which is demonstrated through the ability to reflect, think critically and question their own views. Salmon (2002, 2004) conceptualised online learning as a gradual process (a ladder) that starts off with the acquisition of elementary skills (how to use the relevant technology) to the acquisition of high-order skills, such as critical thinking and reflexivity. Although Salmon's model has been adopted by many institutions, especially in the UK and Australia, scholars such as Moule (2007) have raised concerns about the dominance of the model in online teaching and learning discourse, which tends to stifle other ideas. In some instances, the model is 'seen as a template for the design of all online teaching' in all 'learning environments regardless of the context', thus neglecting contextual differences and the individual learning styles of students. In this study, we adopt this model because it 'provides a framework with clear progressive stages that can support the design and facilitation of online courses' (Moule, 2007: 38); however, we are aware that the stages are

not necessarily applicable to all online learning contexts. The framework is useful because it covers the different aspects of the online learning process, from access and motivation to personal development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study set out to investigate the experiences of tutors engaged in an online tutorial programme at a rural university for the purpose of developing a focused tutor-training programme. We adopted a qualitative research approach, which allowed us to 'gain an understanding of the underlying reasons and motivations for actions and establish how people interpret their experiences and the world around them' (Taherdoost, 2016: 3).

Research design

Qualitative research is a form of 'social inquiry that stresses the way that people interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals' (Mohajan, 2018: 2). We adopted the interpretivist paradigm to make sense of the data relating to the experiences of e-tutors who facilitate tutorials at a rural university campus. Interpretivism is a worldview that assumes that reality is socially constructed (Creswell, 2011). We approached tutors' experiences as experiential knowledge, which has the potential to generate new ways of doing e-learning in rural contexts. The participants consisted of 15 online tutors who passed the relevant module with good grades (at least 65%).

Procedure

We collected data from 15 participants (online tutors) who were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained otherwise (Taherdoost, 2016). Purposive sampling was preferred because tutors were already involved in an online tutorial programme and were likely to offer important reflections based on their experience. Although the objective was to solicit views from all tutors who were part of the online tutorial programme (the target population), only 9 responded to the structured questionnaire, which translated to a 60% response rate. We did not include students enrolled in the module because we wanted to reflect on facilitating rather than learning experiences. The participants responded to the following questions:

(i) How did you experience e-tutorials with your tutees?

(ii) How comfortable have you been engaging with tutees online?

(iii) How did the tutees contribute to discussions during e-tutorials?

(iv) What were the challenges that you faced while facilitating e-tutorials?

(v) What do you think needs to be done to address the challenges you highlighted in question 4 (if any)?

The tutorial programme that this study reflects on was introduced in an English Literature module at a rural South African university campus in 2018. The initiative was inspired by a number of challenges that the University faces, such as timetable clashes, limited venues and poor student attendance in traditional physical tutorials. The objective of the programme was to find ways of facilitating academic discussions among students using the Blackboard LMS. Before tutors commenced their duties and responsibilities, they attended a mandatory, generic tutor-training program, which equipped them with skills on how to conduct effective e-tutorials. Thereafter, each tutor was allocated one group consisting of 17 students. The e-tutorials ran for 12 weeks per semester.

Each week, tutors facilitated a discussion based on a given topic. The questions were usually formulated as essay type and were based on prescribed literary texts. The discussions ran from Monday, at about nine o'clock in the morning, to Sunday at noon. We decided to include weekends because some students

had no time to effectively participate in the discussions during the week. Moreover, weekends also helped manage the connectivity challenges that students often experienced during the week when the majority of students needed access to the internet. The core responsibilities of online tutors included, among others, posting the discussion topic every Monday, reading student contributions, guiding the discussion and providing timely feedback. At the end of each discussion, e-tutors were expected to provide a summary of the discussion, which students could use as notes in preparation for tests.

Data collection

The study used a structured questionnaire to solicit data from tutors who worked on an e-tutorial programme. Abawi (2013) defines a questionnaire as a data-gathering tool that consists of a sequence of questions with an intention to collect data from participants. The questionnaires were distributed to tutors via the Blackboard LMS. We chose a questionnaire because it is 'relatively quick and easy to administer and may be of particular use if clarification of certain questions is required' (Gill et al., 2008: 291). Mathers et al. (2009) posit that questionnaires can be useful research instruments in cases where contextual circumstances cannot allow for face-to-face interviews. In our case, a structured questionnaire was appropriate because the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when gatherings and meetings were not allowed. The study utilised direct, self-report measures that analyse engagement through the affective (perceptions, attitudes), behavioural (activities) and cognitive (interest, active understanding) aspects of the tutors' facilitating experience (Jennings & Angelo, 2006). Direct self-reporting allowed us to delve into the attitudes and experiences of the online tutors.

Ethical Considerations

This study took a principle-based approach to ethics (Wiles et al., 2005), which stipulates that (i) participants should be free to participate in research without feeling intimidated, (ii) research must not cause harm to participants, (iii) research should be valuable and beneficial to others, and (iv) participants should be treated fairly and equally during the research process. We provided the participants with information on the objectives of the study and made them aware that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time if they so wished. In line with the principle of anonymity and confidentiality, participants were identified through pseudonyms and data were not shared with anyone who was not directly involved in the study. Ethical clearance was obtained through the University's Research Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

Before data analysis, all responses were categorised into themes through a process that Miles et al. (2014) call 'coding'. Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study (Miles et al., 2014). In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolises and, thus, attributes interpreted meaning to each datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorisation, theory building, and other analytic processes (Saldaña, 2013). Miles et al. (2014: 72) characterise coding as a process that involves 'deep reflection about and, thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data's meanings'. The purpose of coding is to capture a datum's primary content and essence and to generate themes. In the context of this study, coding involved assigning labels that categorised the participants' responses into themes, which were later analysed in relation to the conceptual framework. We used codes to 'retrieve and categorise similar data chunks so that we could quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct, or theme' (Miles et al., 2013: 72). We assigned codes, such as 'rapport', 'flexibility' and 'challenges', based on recurring patterns. After the data were coded and patterns were identified, we analysed the data using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis 'is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 4). We preferred thematic analysis because it is flexible, and it provides both rich and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of the tutors who participated in the study (6) were female while only three participants were male. This was mainly because female tutors (12) constituted the majority on the tutorial programme. Of the fifteen tutors who worked on the programme, only three were male. However, the findings do not show any differences between female and male tutors in terms of how they experienced the online tutorial programme. In fact, findings indicated that all tutors, regardless of gender, encountered various challenges and that a number of areas needed attention to improve the quality of e-tutorials. We identified five themes that emerged from the tutors' experiences of the programme, namely (i) building rapport, (ii) flexibility, (iii) student engagement, (iv) technological challenges, and (v) lack of motivation.

Building rapport

Online socialisation is critical in online learning. It is through social interaction that tutees find their identities and know their abilities in relation to the skills of their peers. In responding to the first question on how tutors experienced e-tutorials, many tutors reported that e-tutorials helped them understand the prescribed learning material better. They also mentioned that e-tutorials made them realise the importance of developing relationships with students. This finding confirms results from studies by Wright, D'Alba and Jones (2016) and Nathan (2018) which found that rapport between tutors and tutees is important because it helps turn the virtual space into an interactive community of learning. Building relationships with students makes them feel that they belong. Salmon (2004b: 66) submits that, in an online environment, 'the contributor needs to be acknowledged in order to be heard' and 'it is important that the e-moderator avoids the temptation to discount the experience [of a student] in any way or to counter it and enter into argument'. Students are not likely to participate in a platform where they feel lonely and isolated. Often, students need to trust their peers before they can start sharing their ideas and opinions. Below are some of the responses that emphasised the importance of student-tutor rapport:

> The experience is good, and I am developing a mutual relationship with my tutees as I learn the texts prescribed for the module conveniently. I also enjoy the discussions because they give me an insight of what the texts analysed actually aim to teach. (Tutor 9)

Tutor 9 makes a connection between establishing a mutual relationship with tutees and understanding the prescribed texts. In an online platform, students learn better when they feel acknowledged by both the tutor and their peers. This response suggests that establishing rapport on an online platform precedes the learning process. Similarly, Tutor 2 indicates that active and interactive tutees make online learning an 'excellent experience' for tutors.

Flexibility

Tutors also indicated that e-tutorials are an effective way of engaging with students because of their flexibility. This confirms Lewin and Mawoyo's (2014) findings that e-tutorials are flexible and can be accessed at any time. In their own study, Loh, Wong, Quasi and Kingshott (2016) indicated that tutees described flexibility as the pillar for online learning. The asynchronous approach allows both students and tutors to access the discussion board in their own time. Hence, tutors and tutees had sufficient time to go through contributions and thoroughly reflect on them. Tutors also reported that setting ground rules for e-tutorials was crucial both in maintaining respect within the group and in ensuring that the discussion remained focused and relevant. Tutors also indicated that e-tutorials provided them with a platform to explore new ideas and share their experiences. This finding corroborates Ahmad and Chua's (2015) findings regarding virtual learning tutorials as a pedagogical tool in Malaysian HEIs. The following response emphasises flexibility as one advantage of e-tutorials.

> E-tutorials are very fascinating why because you can work even at home in bed it was very nice working with my tutees online, I got to learn new skills but tutees are a lot of work when it comes to discussions. (Tutor 8)

What is evident in the above response is that tutors enjoyed the informal nature of e-tutorials where learning ceases to be limited to the four walls of the classroom but continues even when students are in the comfort of their homes. This is an important point, especially given that the 21st-century student has many things that demand their time. The idea of taking the classroom to their personal space is likely to provide students with more time to engage in learning.

Student engagement

Student engagement is one of the difficult elements to achieve in higher education, in either in face-to-face or online learning environments. However, when asked about tutee contributions, tutors indicated that tutees used the online platform not only to seek clarity from the tutor but also to engage with their peers. This is probably an indication that tutors applied effective collaborative learning strategies that motivated tutees. In some groups, students asked probing questions and made follow-ups with the tutors on issues they did not understand. This is in contrast with Feng, Xie and Liu's (2017) findings in China where students did not prefer working in groups, reasoning that it was time consuming. The following comment highlights the interactive atmosphere that some tutors noticed.

> I found that tutees which were engaged would make the effort to actually read what their colleagues have posted, recognise either their mistakes or the correct arguments that the discussion thread would be asking and then act and in some cases expand on what the question demanded. (Tutor 5)

Although tutees also faced some difficulties, tutors observed information exchange among tutees that is only possible when collaborative learning strategies are used to facilitate discussion. Collaço (2017) intimates that interaction among students helps them create knowledge and achieve their learning outcomes. Salmon (2004) notes that connectedness with time and place as well as connectedness with others contribute to online socialising.

Technological challenges

Reflecting on the challenges they encountered, some tutors stated that they had difficulties with internet access, especially off campus (Joubert & Snyman, 2018). They also reported that they could not consistently engage with students when off campus because of data costs. This confirms findings from other studies that have investigated challenges faced by students in virtual learning environments (Dube, 2020). Tutors also reported that power outages affected their work. South Africa has, for several years, experienced power challenges that affect technology-enhanced learning in institutions of education. Tutors indicated that, in some instances, the internet would shut down while they were busy with tutorials. This finding is consistent with McGuiness and Fulton's (2019: 16) study at the University College Dublin in Ireland, which reveals that unreliable internet connectivity poses a serious challenge to effective online learning. Below is a response from a tutor in relation to poor internet connectivity:

> I will say Blackboard must try to be always working during weekdays and in order to help students who have problems with grammar maybe each tutee must create another blog for those who need kind of help so that they will be familiar with. (Tutor 6)

It is evident from the excerpt above that access to online learning is vastly impeded by technological glitches such as poor connectivity. Tutor 4 (an off-campus student) also highlighted high data costs, which made it difficult for him to work from home over weekends.

Lack of motivation

Many tutors were concerned about the level of plagiarism in students' contributions. Some students did not show the motivation to learn as they simply copied and pasted responses from online sources. Joubert and Snyman (2018) listed a lack of commitment from students as one of the challenges faced by e-tutors. Tutors also reported that some students posted contributions late or on the last day of the discussion, which made it difficult for the tutors to give feedback. Others reported that students treated e-tutorials as a submission drop box instead of a discussion. Some students submitted contributions, but they never responded to comments from other students. Tutors also reported cases of unresponsive students whose behaviour compromised student engagement and peer learning. In their own studies, Hartnett (2016) and Stenbom, Jansson and Hulkko (2016) identified student unresponsiveness as a major challenge in online learning. The responses below highlights challenges related to lack of motivation:

> Some just post for the sake of just posting they do not care to engage with the reading materials. Like I said in my previous response, there are also those that really take the initiative of doing their work. (Tutor 1)

The responses show that a lack of motivation manifests in different ways, such as plagiarism, posting meaningless contributions and treating the online learning platform as a submission drop box where they dump contributions without interacting with others. Since the discussions were graded, some students were simply concerned about marks, hence they focused on submitting 'something' rather than engaging in a discussion.

Possible solutions to identified challenges

Findings in this study confirm Stickler and Hampel's (2007) observation that online tutors face both pedagogical and technological challenges. Both tutors and tutees need training on how to use Blackboard tools, particularly the discussion board. In this study, findings suggest that many students did not know how to manoeuvre on the Blackboard platform. Dube (2020) indicates that it is imperative for online teachers to be trained before they facilitate online learning. As highlighted in the discussion above, students need to understand the difference between online and face-to-face tutorials. E-tutorials are only beneficial if they are interactive. To deal with unresponsive students, one of the tutors suggested that early warning systems need to be developed to inform students about the need to participate in the discussions. Tutors also indicated that the University needs to build more computer labs to ensure that all students have access to the internet when they need it. The response below highlights some of the main challenges that tutors faced:

> Tutees must be thoroughly inducted on the e-tutorials and conscientious that discussions are just like face to face tutorials which do not carry a grade with them so that students do not treat online discussions like they are assessments. (Tutor 9)

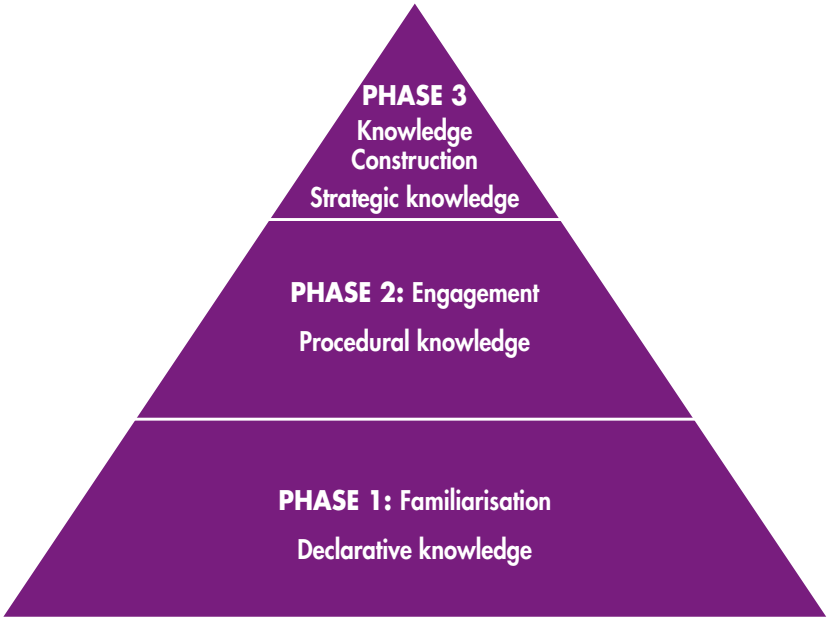
One of the major challenges with e-tutorials is that students expect all their contributions to be graded. If discussions do not contribute to a mark, students tend to lose motivation. Given the preoccupation with marks, some students simply ignore the interactive aspect of the virtual classroom and continue to treat it as a submission (rather than a discussion) forum. To deal with this problem, Tutor 9 recommended some form of training for students before they engage in e-tutorials. However, scholars such as Moule (2007) have recommended peer assessment as a possible solution.

Tutor-training framework for a focused e-tutorial programme

Although Salmon's e-moderating framework is a useful model for online learning, it does not apply to all learning contexts. In fact, the model does not address some of the challenges faced by students in

rural communities, such as poor internet connectivity and limited knowledge of an LMS. In developing the e-moderating framework, Salmon (2011) identified three forms of knowledge that are critical in online learning platforms, namely (i) declarative knowledge, (ii) procedural knowledge and (iii) strategic knowledge. Declarative knowledge involves technical knowhow about how certain tools function, which implies that e-tutors need to know how to operate the relevant LMS. Procedural knowledge entails knowledge about the steps that a tutor needs to follow in operating the system. Lastly, strategic knowledge involves knowledge about how to apply e-moderating skills. This encompasses skills related to how to respond to student contributions and how to redirect discussions and prompt debate. An effective tutor-training programme should focus on inculcating and developing these three types of knowledge among e-moderators. Salmon's conceptualisation of e-learning as a ladder is somewhat problematic because it presupposes that students ought to follow a set of predetermined steps in order to succeed. The notion of a 'ladder' can be interpreted as exclusionary because it creates the impression that those who are at the bottom of the ladder are less 'cool' than those at the top. Students who perceive themselves as being at the bottom of the ladder may feel excluded and shun participation. Given that technological literacy is often associated with being modern or civilised, students often do not want to be seen as technologically illiterate. We, therefore, propose a model that conceptualises online learning in terms of phases rather than steps that students need to scale. Figure 1 shows the proposed tutor-training model that identifies three phases of the tutor-training process, namely (i) the familiarisation phase, (ii) the engagement phase and (iii) the knowledge construction phase.

Figure 1:
Pyramid tutor training model



The tutor-training model focuses on equipping tutors with technical knowhow, communication or interaction skills, and developing the critical thinking skills required to produce new knowledge. In Phase 1, tutors are equipped with basic computer literacy skills such as identifying relevant icons and learning how to use them to navigate the system. In Phase 2, tutors acquire knowledge about the online learning process with a particular focus on how to handle diversity in discussions. This includes knowledge about how to send positive or motivating messages, how to keep the discussion lively, how to redirect the discussion and how to assess student contributions. Phase 2 is the 'how-to phase' because it focuses on developing knowledge about appropriate procedures. Phase 3 involves explaining to tutors what they can do with the e-moderating skills that they have acquired in Phase 1 and Phase 2. Phase 3 develops skills such as

creativity, critical thinking and reflexivity. At this phase, tutors use their knowledge of both the software and technical procedures to facilitate e-learning. This model is different from Salmon's (2002) framework because it focuses on developing knowledge rather than prescribing a specific procedure for e-learning. Unlike Salmon's five-step model, we prefer to think of online learning as consisting of phases that are flexible, overlapping and elastic.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

E-tutorials require creativity and the ability to adjust facilitation methods to the needs of tutees. It is vital for the tutors to create a dynamic, online platform by asking probing questions that promote dialogue and to discourage tutees from using the online discussion platform as a dumping site where they post contributions without engaging with others' contributions. Tutees need to be inducted into the online learning environment before they can even begin e-tutorials.

Findings from this study show that e-tutors ought to be prepared for e-tutorials through training. E-tutors should familiarise themselves with the relevant software and tools (icons) so that they can deftly navigate the system. It is evident from the findings that institutions of learning should build additional computer labs and provide data to ensure access to the online learning platforms. The study also established that system breakdowns affect engagement between tutors and students negatively.

However, we recognise that e-tutorials have the potential to allow students to collaborate and share ideas rather than them having to work in isolation. While face-to-face tutorials tend to marginalise introverted students, e-tutorials provide a safe platform for all students to contribute without feeling intimidated. Since our online tutorial programme was asynchronous, students could contribute to the discussion in their own time, far from the intimidating eyes of tutors and other students. E-tutorials can thus be effective if both tutors and students understand their roles. Findings show that e-tutorials require creativity and the ability to adjust facilitation methods to the context and needs of tutees. Clearly, e-tutorials have the potential to become vibrant peer-learning spaces, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that requires students to learn in socially distanced environments. This study will contribute to the field of online teaching and learning by developing a framework that can be used to provide training to online tutors. We, therefore, recommend that tutors should receive relevant training before they facilitate and moderate online tutorials.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is based on a small sample of 15 tutors who were involved in an online tutoring programme at a rural university campus in South Africa. As a result, the findings cannot be easily generalised to other contexts. The study could have generated more generalisable results if it had used a larger sample size. Moreover, a mixed-methods approach could have probably highlighted different reflections based on gender, race, class and other variables. Future studies should include a bigger sample size, apply different research methods, and focus on institutions in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

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