What drives student participation in online tutorials?

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OU’s method of distance learning is referred to as ‘supported open learning’ or SOL

- **Flexible** – meet the needs of part time distance learners
- **All inclusive** - students are supplied with all the learning materials they need, these can be printed texts and/or online resources
- **Supportive** – Associate Lecturers provide academic expertise, guidance and feedback and run group tutorials
- **Social** - students come together at synchronous tutorials (face to face or online) and through online conferencing via forums

OU tutorials have traditionally emphasised **student centred learning** and **peer associated learning** but student attendance is not mandatory.
Introduction

- Discussion
  - Module wide
  - Tutor group
  - Student
  - Cluster group
  - Project work
  - Assessment support
  - Academic support
  - Encouragement

Skills support

Interaction
Background-2

Synchronous online tutorials take place currently in OU Live (OU version of Blackboard Collaborate) and this mode of delivery is now used for the majority of tutorials in OU Life Sciences modules.

Most OU Life sciences modules currently offer different types of synchronous online tuition:

- **Tutor group tutorials** (around 20 invitees) – with students’ own AL (personal tutor)

- **Combined tutor group tutorials** (up to around 200 invitees) - with two or three ALs drawn from a tutor team and a collection of tutor groups

- **Entire student cohort** on module (up to 1500 invitees) – with a group of ALs and other staff

Online tutorials are routinely recorded to offer flexibility in order to meet the needs of part-time students.
Inevitably the different types of tutorial format lend themselves to different types of learning activity, student engagement and participation.

However in all cases, Associate Lecturers are encouraged to make their tutorials as interactive as possible, using the full range of tools available in OU Live.

For example:
- Emoticons
- True or false questions
- Polling
- Answering/asking questions in the chat box
- Writing content onto the whiteboard
- Drag and drop activities on whiteboard
- Answering/asking questions by a microphone
- Application sharing requiring student input
- Student group work and discussion – using break out rooms
Example OU Live room

How are you feeling about studying SDK100?

A – very excited/happy

B – vote here

C – I’m not sure what to expect

D – very nervous
Expectations of student interactivity

**Level of interactivity**

- **Entire student cohort**
  - Up to 1500 students

- **Several tutor groups**
  - Up to 200 students

- **Tutor group tutorial**
  - Up to 20 students
Initial observations: AL focus

After viewing/evaluating a large number of recorded Life Sciences tutorials of all types it has become apparent that regardless of the number of student participants in the tutorial, many Associate Lecturers:

- deliver a PowerPoint presentation based largely on the OU materials the student already has
- rely on only the simplest of the interactive tools available in OU Live – namely T/F questions, MC questions, polling and chat box traffic
- have little or no expectation that students will speak using the microphone
- are reluctant to run activities which draw explicitly on student’s understanding
- do not offer opportunities for extended group activities within the tutorial
- are unsure how to establish the learning needs of the students present
- make little attempt to assess students’ understanding
- are unsure whether to cater for the needs of the students present or the potential audience who will listen to the recording
Initial observations: student focus

After viewing/evaluating a large number of recorded OU Live tutorials of all types it has become apparent that in all contexts, for many students:

- there is little or no opportunity to contribute to the agenda
- there is little opportunity to speak
- communication is only via the chat box
- there is limited or no peer interaction during a tutorial
- there is limited opportunity to test their understanding
- there is little opportunity for individual support with threshold concepts
Why does this matter to us?

We are concerned that our current provision of online synchronous tuition

- does not enable a student centred, constructivist approach to learning
- provides no or little additional benefit for students to attend tutorials in real time, the same benefit can be derived from simply viewing a recording
- places unrealistic burdens on our ALs to attempt to offer student centred tuition in an online environment which favours tutor-led activity
- is not perceived as valuable by the many students – synchronous engagement is low (25-30%)
Aims of our project

- To achieve a fuller understanding of student-tutor and student-student interactions in synchronous online tutorials
- To achieve a better understanding of student perceptions of online tuition
- To identify areas where practitioner professional development is required
- To inform future tutorial policy in Life Sciences and in the wider STEM faculty
Methods

- **Phase-1** - completed
  - Reviewing a range of online tutorials in Life Sciences (via recorded tutorials)
  - Development of an evaluation tool
  - Trial evaluation tool with small number of recorded tutorials

- **Phase-2**
  - Recruitment and briefing of Associate Lecturers to evaluate a series of online tutorials per module
  - Collect quantitative and qualitative data from the evaluation tool
  - Data analysis

- **Phase-3**
  - Student and tutor survey
  - Focus group activity

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**Recruit ALs**
- **Feb – Mar 2017**

**Collect data from tutorial evaluation**
- **Apr – Jun 2017**

**Analyse tutorial evaluation**
- **Jul – Sep 2017**

**Design student and tutor questionnaires**
- **Sep – Dec 2017**

**Completion of student & tutor survey**
- **Jan – Mar 2018**

**Student focus groups**
- **Apr – Jun 2018**
Phase 1: Student communication during online tutorials

- Students discussing subject verbally in main room: No. of tutorials ≥ 50%
- Students asking questions verbally in main room: No. of tutorials ≥ 50%
- Students asking questions in chat box: No. of tutorials ≥ 50%
- Students presenting information: No. of tutorials ≥ 50%
- Students answering questions in chat box: No. of tutorials ≥ 50%

No opportunity provided
Phase 1: Student engagement with interactive tools during online tutorials

- Drawing on whiteboard
- Labeling diagrams
- Completing tables
- Completing maths equations
- Drag and drop
- Using emoticons
- Completing quizzes
- Completing polls

No. of tutorials

Interactive tool

<50%  >50%  No opportunity provided
Questions