TUTORING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A HANDBOOK FOR TUTORS

THE COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING

The Commonwealth of Learning is an international organisation established by Commonwealth governments in September 1988, following the Heads of Government Meeting held in Vancouver in 1987. It is headquartered in Vancouver and is the only Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation located outside Britain.

The purpose of The Commonwealth of Learning, as reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding, is to create and widen access to education and to improve its quality, utilising distance education techniques and associated communications technologies to meet the particular requirements of member countries. The agency's programmes and activities aim to strengthen member countries' capacities to develop the human resources required for their economic and social advancement. They are carried out in collaboration with governments, relevant agencies, universities, colleges and other educational and training establishments, among whom it also seeks to promote cooperative endeavours.

The Chairman of the Board of Governors is Mr. Lewis Perinbam, O.C.; the Commonwealth of Learning's President and Chief Executive Officer is Dato' Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan.

CONTENTS

This book is one in a developing series of handbooks for practitioners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The series covers the key roles and functions of ODL systems from the practitioner perspective. The purpose is to give practitioners advice and guidance about their tasks, functions and roles, and to enable practitioners to reflect on the critical issues they face. In this way, the series aims to model good ODL study materials and to provide key study materials for ODL training. In developing this series, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) seeks to address the needs of ODL for accessible and practical training materials for professional development. Each handbook can be read in a number of ways – as an informative text; as part of the materials for a workshop or short training programme; or as part of an extended training and study programme requiring learners to undertake a practical project. In whatever way you work with the text, we suggest that you undertake the text activities as though you were an ODL student.

COL is interested in hearing how you have used this handbook and in any feedback you may wish to give, including how you have adapted and added to the handbook, so that we can all share from each other's experience. Please send your feedback to Helen Lentell, Educational Specialist (Training and Materials Development) (hlentell@col.org).

The writer has written Unit 4 drawing upon her experience as a tutor on the course Writing effectively for UNHCR. This is a distance learning course developed and delivered by COL for UNHCR.

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to help you strengthen your understanding of the principles and practice of tutoring in open and distance learning (ODL), and to feel more confident in applying these principles and practices to your particular situation. This handbook is for you if your role involves providing direction, academic support and assessment through consistent contact with open and distance learners engaged in a specific course of study. The most commonly used term for this role is 'tutor'; other terms are 'mentor', 'facilitator', 'guide', 'instructor' or 'teacher'. It is also for you if your role involves working with tutors, as a colleague, administrator, supervisor, or course author. By reading this handbook and completing the activities, you will have an opportunity to:

- explore how the principles of ODL affect our approaches to tutoring
- explore four areas of tutor skills: supportive, administrative, instructional and facilitative, and the relationships between these skill areas
- consider how these skill areas are applied to specific tutor roles and responsibilities
- practise skills in each of these areas by completing activities that are relevant to your context and experience.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is divided into several units.

- The Introduction and Unit 1 introduce essential information about how ODL works, and explain what skills tutors need and why.
- Unit 2 describes the roles and responsibilities of tutors.
- Unit 3 explores the sustaining role of tutors.
- Unit 4 explores the many dimensions of assessing learners' workwork, and draws on the writer's experience as a tutor on the course Writing effectively for UNHCR.
- Unit 5 explores the tutor's role in guiding tutorials or discussion sessions.
- Unit 6 provides an opportunity to consider the support that tutors need.
- Appendix A provides suggested study plans for use with the handbook in different contexts.
- Appendix B provides additional guidance on adapting activities to a group setting for the facilitators of group training.
- The Bibliography provides references quoted in the text and other texts and websites of interest to the ODL tutor.

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

If you are new to ODL, you may find it helpful to complete each unit in sequence; otherwise you may prefer to focus on the units that are particularly relevant for the kind of work you do. The handbook has been designed to enable groups and individuals to use it as flexibly as possible by selecting topics and activities that are most relevant to their needs.

The first page of each unit will help you to identify topics that are of most interest to you, and hence to organise your individual studies or select topics for group training. Each unit then explores theoretical concepts about learners and learning that are relevant to tutoring practice. You will have a chance to consider how these concepts are relevant to your situation, and to use the activities to practise specific skills. The activities are addressed directly to the learner, and intended to prompt learning through reflection on experience, concepts, practical applications and consideration of the process and outcomes. If you are:

- reading the handbook for general background, try the activities most relevant to your interests

- developing your own skills as a tutor, you should complete most of the activities in writing as they will serve as a useful reference as you proceed with your studying and your tutoring role

- planning skill development for tutors, you can use or adapt the activities for your group in the light of the notes for facilitators in Appendix B.

Possible pathways through this handbook

Depending on your needs and context, you can choose to follow different pathways through this handbook. Sample study plans in Appendix A suggest ways of using this handbook for workshops or short distance learning courses. You may want to:

- acquire general background information about tutoring in ODL

- develop your own skills as a tutor

- plan skill development programmes for groups of tutors

- prepare a tutor guide for your institution or organisation.

As an independent reader, you can use the handbook for reference by simply reading through the sections that are most relevant to your interests.

As an individual learner, you can use this handbook as a resource for learning by completing the activities, and considering how the ideas and activities could be applied to your tutoring situation. It is a good idea to make notes on your reading and to write down your responses to questions and activities: the writing process helps you to organise thoughts, and you will be able to refer to and build on your written responses as you go along. If you want to use this handbook for informal or planned group learning activities, you can, with your colleagues, use the activities and discussion topics in a study session.

If you are using this handbook to plan skill development for prospective tutors, it is a good idea to consult with tutors about their learning needs when selecting topics and activities. You can plan a series of short sessions by addressing one unit or topic area in each session and selecting the questions, activities and discussion topics that are most relevant to the participants. Ideally, participants should prepare for the session by reading the relevant section of the handbook.

If you are planning a longer study session (e.g. one or two days) for participants with varying needs and levels of experience, you could set up parallel groups to explore topics that match their needs. For example, a group with limited ODL experience might focus on Unit 1 activities, and more experienced groups might concentrate on Units 3, 4 and 5. Alternatively, you could arrange sessions so that everyone is working on the same topic simultaneously, and organise participants so that there are different levels of experience within each group. This arrangement would allow each group to share newcomers' insights and the know-how of 'old hands'.

YOUR GOALS

Your goals in reading this handbook may depend on your situation. For example, if you are:

- an experienced tutor, you may want to read this handbook to answer some questions, to examine the strengths and weaknesses of your own practice, or to get some fresh ideas and approaches
- new to tutoring, you may want to get an overview of the whole process, and then focus on the skills that are immediately relevant to your work
- involved in guiding and training tutors, you may want to use this handbook as a resource for training
- a course author or administrator, you may want to get a greater understanding of the tutor's role and its relationship with your role.

Activity 0.1 Your goals

What would you like to learn about ODL?

What would you like to learn about specific aspects of tutoring?

What would you hope to be able to do better as a result of this learning?

Are you:

- a tutor with sole responsibility for your students
- one of a group of tutors working under a senior tutor
- a course author
- someone who supervises and/or trains tutors
- someone who manages an ODL programme?

What type of educational institution or organisation is providing the ODL:

- university
- college
- teacher training institution
- technical training institution

- school

- non-government organisation

- other?

If you are a tutor, is the area of studies you will tutor:

- academic (specify level, e.g. basic education, secondary school, university)

- technical/vocational training (specify field, e.g. carpentry, agriculture)

- professional development (specify area, e.g. medical, legal)

- other (e.g. community development)?

Are the ODL programmes or courses developed by:

- the institution or organisation that offers them

- another organisation?

Who prepared the course that you will tutor:

- you

- colleague(s)

- person(s) in your own institution, whom you do not know

- person(s) from another institution?

COMMENT

Your list of goals is the basis of your learning plan, and you can refer to it throughout your studies to assess how each activity helps you achieve your goals. As you work through this handbook developing your learning plan, you can identify the units most relevant to your learning needs and context, adapting the handbook to meet your needs and applying the skills of a self-directed learner. By adding a timeline, you can make your learning plan into a personal schedule for implementation. Your goals may be related to:

- working within your context or institution

- strategies to help learners in a particular field of studies

- tutoring a course that was developed by someone you may not know.

Your goals will also depend on a number of factors related to your individual learning needs and your context, such as the:

- nature of the course or programme

- type of educational provider

- nature of your role as tutor.

The nature of the course or programme

The course or programme of study that you are tutoring may be academic, technical, vocational, or in basic education; it could also be a non-formal educational course that is offered by an employer or a non-profit organisation. The course may have been developed specifically for the educational institution or organisation that is offering the course; it may have been developed by a group of educational institutions, or it may have been purchased or leased from another source. The learners may be adults, young people, or children. They may be experienced learners, new to the academic world, or returning to learning after a long absence.

The type of educational provider

The educational institution offering the course may be a university, college, technical institute or school. It may offer courses and programmes in both face-to-face tuition and through ODL (this is called a dual-mode institution), or it may offer courses and programmes only through ODL (a single-mode institution). The course provider may have many years' experience in offering ODL, or this may be one of its first ODL ventures.

The nature of your role as tutor

Your tutoring role may be part-time or full-time; as a staff member, or as a freelance (self-employed) consultant. You may be one of several tutors for the same course, who work with a senior tutor, or you may be solely responsible for all the students in the course. You may have had a direct role in authoring the course, you may be a colleague of the course author(s), or you might not know the course authors at all.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE INDEPENDENT LEARNING

If you are using this handbook as an independent learner, you may find the following strategies helpful.

Learning through activities and assessment

When you read through the handbook and complete the activities, you are in a comparable situation to your learners. Each of the activities is designed so that you can complete it on your own, or as part of a group. When self-assessing or reflecting on your work on each activity, you can ask yourself the following questions.

- Did I complete this activity as thoroughly as I could?
- What have I learned from this activity?
- What questions arose from this activity? How can I find answers to these questions?
- If I was using this activity to train tutors, what changes would I make?

Learning journal

A learning journal is a means of maintaining continuity and a record of your activities, ideas, and reflections as you work, in a notebook, or on a computer. Keep separate areas in your journal for your work on the activities, for ideas that occur to you while you are reading or completing activities, and for reflections on the implications of what you are learning for your role as a tutor.

Dialogue

Being an independent learner does not mean that you have to be isolated. Even if you are not working with other educators, you can engage in discussions about learning. Family and friends can comment on how they expect to be treated as learners, or provide feedback on your ideas. If you are in touch with colleagues, either in person or via phone or email, you can ask one or two colleagues to be your 'study buddies' and discuss topics from the handbook with you.

WHAT YOU SHOULD (AND SHOULD NOT) EXPECT FROM THIS HANDBOOK

Just as it's helpful for you to identify what you want to achieve from this handbook, it's important for us to let you know what this handbook can and cannot do.

The handbook will introduce the principles and practice of the essential interactions of tutoring open and distance learners. It will enable you to develop and practise the skills you will need for tutoring, but not in using specific technologies. This handbook will describe typical administrative procedures, and how to learn more about the administrative set up at your institution, but it will not provide details of administrative arrangements specific to one context or institution. As you go through the handbook, you may find it helpful to keep a list of 'questions to ask' of administrators or technical support people so that you can find out information specific to your situation.

UNIT 1:
THE PLACE OF TUTORING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

In this first unit we will look at the role of tutors in open and distance learning (ODL) and the skills and knowledge they need. We will review the skills and experience from other educational contexts that are transferable to tutoring in ODL, and suggest how you can create your own ODL tutor-skills development plan.

OBJECTIVES

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

- summarise the elements of a good learning experience
- differentiate between ODL and traditional learning modalities
- describe the key characteristics of ODL
- identify ODL learners and their characteristics
- describe the role, knowledge and skills of the ODL tutor
- develop a plan for ODL tutoring.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

Good learning is good learning, no matter what its shape or form – in other words, the principles of good learning that underlie everything we do as educators also apply in ODL. So, before we explore tutoring in ODL, let's consider what makes a good learning experience. Common factors, whether in formal or informal education, whether in a classroom or at a distance, include:

- how it is organised
- how the information is presented
- how the teacher responds to learners
- the quality of resources (books, tapes, articles, etc.).

Activity 1.1 A good learning experience

Identify a good learning experience you have had in academic education at any level, or in informal learning, such as woodworking, or learning to play a sport. What did you gain from this learning experience?

Which elements of the experience contributed to its success? Look at the suggested elements of a good learning experience in the answer grid overleaf and add any others you can think of. Then rate their importance as essential, important, or useful.

Element of learning experience	Essential	Important	Useful
Clear information about objectives of study programme			
Structured content and clear study guidelines			
Study materials that can be used independently, e.g. books, other resources			
Clear information about assessment process			
Regular assessment of learner's progress			
Feedback from instructor or tutor to learner about learner's work			
Means for instructor or tutor to help learners with difficulties			
Means of verifying validity of learner's work			
Opportunity for learners to choose projects relevant to them			
Opportunity for tutor and learner to discuss course content and process			
Opportunity for learners to discuss course content and process			
Opportunity for learners to ask questions for clarification			
Opportunities to apply new learning			
Opportunities to practise skills in controlled setting			
Quality of resources			
How the teacher responds to learners			
Presentation of information			
Organisation of the experience			

COMMENT

It may help to invite a friend or colleague to reflect on a good learning experience as well, and then share your observations. Even a chat during a tea break can help identify elements on which you both agree. You can then group these under headings such as the teacher or resource person's contribution; the contributions of other learners; the context, or the learning resources. Having reflected on what makes a good learning experience, you can consider how these elements might be used to create a good ODL experience, but first we will get an overview of ODL.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ODL

This section provides some definitions of ODL terms and approaches to ODL.

SOME USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Open and distance learning refers to education and training in which using learning resources, rather than attending classroom sessions, is the central feature of the learning experience.

Distance learning refers to situations where learners are physically separated from the educational provider, communicating in writing, (using letter mail, email, fax, or computer conferencing); verbally (by telephone, audio conferencing, video conferencing); or in face-to-face tutorial sessions.

Open learning refers to situations where learners use resources in a flexible way to achieve their goal. These resources may be print, audio- or computer-based; used at home, at a study centre or in the workplace; with or without the guidance of a tutor or mentor. Open learners' goals vary greatly, from completing formal accreditation, to learning a specific job-related skill, to pursuing a leisure interest.

Activity 1.2 Open or distance?

Which term (open or distance) is commonly used in your context?

Write down any formal definitions of the terms in use at your institution.

COMMENT

As you will notice from the definitions above, there is considerable overlap between the two terms, open and distance learning, and they are often used together to refer to the whole range of learning approaches described above.

THE BENEFITS OF ODL

ODL allows learners to study when and where suits them best. They continue learning while fulfilling commitments to work, family or community. Those living in remote areas or with limited transport can study courses that would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

ODL can provide a variety of study opportunities, (academic, technical/vocational, personal and professional development, basic education) to a range of learners (young adults, adults returning to learning, people preparing to enter trades or professions, people acquiring new work-related skills, established professionals in health and education working towards further accreditation).

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ODL

Approaches to ODL may be characterised by the type of learning resources and nature of interaction, or in terms of generations (Bates, 1995), but it is important to remember that all generations are still part of current practice and that some models include characteristics of more than one generation. Bates' definitions of three generations of ODL are given here:

- *First generation* learners study alone, with limited contact from the educational provider. This model was typically used for correspondence study and is still used to provide learners with resources they can study independently to prepare for examinations offered by an accrediting body, such as a professional organisation or a university.

- *Second generation* distance education provides learning resources in one or more media and consistent communication between the learner and the tutor and, sometimes, additional learning support from the educational provider. This approach is used in many situations in which distance learners study alone, rather than in groups.

- *Third generation* distance learning provides learning resources in one or more media and interaction among learners as well as between the tutor and learner. Interaction may be via conferencing technologies (audio, video, computer), email or face-to-face meetings and is used when group learning is combined with individual learning.

Activity 1.3 The benefits of different types of ODL

Use Bates' definitions of different generations of ODL to help you identify examples of each type, from your own experience if possible. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of each and summarise your findings in the table below.

ODL type	Example	Advantages	Disadvantages
First generation			
Second generation			
Third generation			

COMMENT

One of the interesting issues raised by Bates' categorisation is that using a broader range of technologies to enhance the learning experience can sometimes reduce accessibility

ADVANTAGES OF ODL FOR EDUCATIONAL PROVIDERS

For educational providers, the advantages of ODL include:

- increased capacity and better use of resources. Well-planned ODL enables an educational institution to provide educational programmes to more learners, more flexibly, by using existing resources in a different way or incrementally increasing existing resources. Instead of paying for new classrooms for students, an institution can hire staff to develop and teach distance courses and invest in ODL support structures, such as study centres or technologies
- the ability to reach learners who cannot attend an educational institution
- the ability to offer quality learning materials and individualised support. Good ODL course materials present course content in a format that learners can study independently. This means tutors can concentrate on facilitating learning and providing personalised attention to learners rather than delivering the course content.

The next activity is a chance to consider how the elements of a good learning experience transfer to ODL. Complete the activity even if you have little personal experience with ODL,

as you can revisit and revise your assumptions at later stages in the handbook. If you have experience with ODL, keep in mind that there are many approaches to ODL.

Activity 1.4 A good ODL experience

For each of the elements of a good learning experience you identified in Activity 1.1, decide whether it can be incorporated into an ODL experience and if so, how, or if not, then why not?

COMMENT

You may have identified that the quality of the ODL experience can be affected by the:

- quality, accuracy and completeness of the learning materials
- cost, reliability and ease of use of any technologies needed
- degree of consistency in approach between course materials and assessment process
- educational provider's commitment to learners in practical terms, such as the availability of people who can answer questions
- availability and readiness of tutors to respond to learners' needs and provide clear, timely assessment of work.

You may have identified many elements of a good learning experience that are linked to three important characteristics of ODL:

- accessibility
- flexibility
- learner-centredness.

Some of these issues fall outside tutors' responsibilities, but you may be able to help learners deal with many of these situations. We will return to these issues in Units 2 and 3.

If you felt that some of the important elements of a good learning experience could not be applied in ODL, you should take note of them. As you continue through this handbook, use this to help you identify issues that need to be addressed and assess how well these issues can be handled in your context. ODL offers alternative ways of providing these essential elements, and you may find the solutions you need as you work through this handbook.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF ODL

Let's take a look at the implications of some key characteristics of ODL.

ACCESSIBILITY

One of the main reasons for delivering training and education via ODL is to make it accessible to people who cannot attend regular classes due to social, structural or personal situations. These might include a lack of places in educational institutions, distance from educational institutions, absence of specific programmes, family commitments, the need to continue earning while learning, or travel costs.

Accessibility is key to ODL, so methods and technologies should enhance, not limit it. A course that requires regular email use will limit accessibility if most learners lack reliable computer access. In this case, allowing learners to write or audiotape assignments and submit them by post, fax or in person will improve accessibility. Methods and technologies should not limit access for people with disabilities; learning resources should be adaptable to different media by, for example, transcribing audiotapes into print for hearing-impaired people, or audiotaping print materials for visually impaired people.

Activity 1.5 Ensuring access

What are the main barriers to access to conventional education in your context?

How does ODL address these barriers?

COMMENT

The barriers that learners face will be determined by the context. Barriers can exist in unexpected forms. For example, learners may be deterred by the difficulty of balancing the time demands of study with those of their career. Other common barriers are geographical or time-related – people who are working may not be able to attend classes at regular times.

FLEXIBILITY

This term covers giving learners the:

- *physical flexibility* to study at a time and place that suits them
- *educational flexibility* to study subjects, courses and programmes in an order and manner appropriate to their needs.

Educational flexibility is less common in conventional academic institutions, where the content, sequencing and structure of programmes tend to be fixed. However, some institutions that offer ODL are becoming more flexible about admission requirements and may restructure programmes to meet specific needs, such as specialised training for professionals.

Many learners prefer ODL that accommodates their approach to learning. They may prefer print- and text-based courses to classroom sessions if they like to learn by reading, reflection and writing.

Activity 1.6 Flexibility

What elements of flexibility does your institution provide for open and distance learners?

COMMENT

You may find that your institution provides flexibility in many ways, through different approaches to materials delivery, work assessment or tutorial interaction. This flexibility is a strong characteristic of good ODL.

LEARNER-CENTREDNESS

The phrase 'learner-centredness' is used frequently but inconsistently in ODL. At one level, it enshrines the goal of providing education and training in a way that prioritises learners' needs, rather than institutional convenience. At another level, it means enabling learners to pursue their studies in a way that is appropriate for their circumstances, learning goals and learning style. For the educational institution, this means providing good quality learning materials in appropriate, accessible media, and giving sufficient support to ensure learners have a good chance of successful completion.

One of the basic goals for the development of ODL is to provide more learner-centred education and training. The next activity will give you a chance to think more about this.

Activity 1.7 Are you focused on the learner?

How would you define learner-centredness?

What are its implications in your context?

How do you reconcile it with the need to be true to your discipline?

Is it possible to provide learner-centred ODL?

Why, or why not?

COMMENT

Not everyone agrees with the concept of learner-centredness in academic education and some educators argue strongly that the need to focus on the principles and standards of the discipline supersedes the goal of learner-centredness. It can, however, be argued that it is possible to meet both goals.

SUPPORT

This covers:

- administrative support: providing basic information about the educational institution, registration and admission processes, and maintenance of academic records
- academic support: systems that enable learners to investigate courses and programmes that meet their needs, provide tutoring and assessment during the course, offer suggestions for help or enrichment and guidance on future courses or paths of study
- personal support: including counselling to help with family or emotional problems, and advice on getting financial help.

WHO ARE ODL LEARNERS?

Is there a 'typical' ODL learner? Considering their numbers worldwide, their different circumstances and reasons for learning, it seems unlikely. However, there are common characteristics we should keep in mind. Here are some ODL learners.

Claudia works for UNHCR, the United Nations organisation that provides aid and advocacy for refugees and displaced persons, in a regional office in former Yugoslavia. Her first language is Italian, and she is taking the ODL course, 'Writing Effectively for UNHCR' to improve her written communication, especially her report-writing skills. She handles many projects at once, travels often, and is on call to deal with crisis situations. She studies her course when she has an hour or two to spare and keeps in touch with her tutor with regular emails.

George lost his job a year ago when the mill where he had worked since he left school closed. He had always made furniture as a hobby, and enrolled in an ODL programme on setting up and operating a small business so that he could learn how to turn his hobby into a profitable enterprise. The programme has print- and computer-based resources, and requires him to submit regular assignments. At the same time, he's trying to earn money from furniture-making and odd jobs, taking whatever work is available, even if it means setting aside his studies for a time.

Zoe, a community nurse in southern Africa, is taking ODL courses in community health practice to enhance her skills and gain further qualifications. The courses provide print materials and monthly face-to-face tutorials. She has to visit communities across a large area and cannot always attend the tutorials, so she has to find other ways of keeping up with the course and in touch with her tutor.

Yussuf works in the external studies unit of a large university in south-east Asia. His unit has begun a five-year project to provide certificate and baccalaureate programmes to teachers through ODL. He wants to learn about ODL so that he is effective in this new project, and has enrolled in a graduate programme in ODL practice, which is itself offered by ODL from a university in Europe. The courses use web-based and print resource, and on-line discussions with other learners and the tutor, as well as regular assignments and group projects.

There are characteristics of these ODL learners that have implications for how they will approach learning, how they could benefit from ODL, and the challenges they may face in pursuing an open or distance course.

ODL LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

We have listed a few common characteristics of adult distance learners below. Each of these characteristics has implications for their learning process.

Characteristic	Implication
Adults with busy lives, family and work commitments	Little time for learning, other commitments may disrupt their learning schedule
Usually have clear goals for learning	More committed to achieving their goal and continue their learning if at all possible
May have been away from formal learning for some time	May need some orientation to formal learning processes: academic writing, research, use of library, etc.
May not be able to reach libraries or other academic resources	May need to have resources made available in different ways (sent from libraries or at study centres)
Often interested in implications of their learning for their life and work	More likely to be motivated to continue; may want to explore how learning relates to work or life situations in assignments

Activity 1.8 Who are your learners?

This activity will help you think about the characteristics of your own students. In the table below, describe the learners that you will tutor and the implications of these characteristics for learning. If you are not a tutor, describe the characteristics of the students of your institution or the four typical students we described earlier.

Characteristic	Your learners	Implications
Age range		
Gender balance		
Location (e.g. rural or urban, near/far to educational institution)		
Other factors (e.g. family, work commitments, etc.)		
Educational background (average level of prior education)		
Reasons for taking course (academic, career training, upgrading)		
Short-term goals		
Long-term goals		
Types of support available within learner's context (e.g. workplace)		

COMMENT

It is important that tutors know at least this much about their learners. If you are not sure about the characteristics of your learners, ask your organisation or institution for more information.

APPROACHES AND RESPONSES TO LEARNERS' ISSUES IN ODL

Educators have spent much time and effort studying learners' needs and approaches to learning. Some of their commentaries and responses are summarised below. Read the following table of commentaries on adult learners and then complete the next activity.

Issue	Learners' approaches	Implications for educators
Multiple dimensions of each learner	*'The learner is more than a cognitive machine processing information. He or she comes with a mind, memories, conscious and subconscious worlds, emotions, imagination and physical body, all of which can interact with new learning.'* (Merriam, 2001)	*'Adults learn best in environments which provide trusting relationships, opportunities for interpersonal interactions with both the teacher and other learners, and support and safety for testing new behaviours.'* (Brundage and MacKeracher, 1980)
	'The learner reacts to all experience as he/she perceives it, not as the teacher presents it. The adult learner reacts to a learning experience out of an organised whole self-concept and perceives the experience as an integrated whole.' (Roby Kidd, in Brundage and MacKeracher, 1980)	*'Activities which support and encourage organisation and integration should be part of all adult learning processes.'* (Roby Kidd, 1980)
Learning to learn	*'All adults do not necessarily possess all the meanings, values, strategies, and skills required for new learning activities.'* (Brundage and MacKeracher, 1980)	*'Acquisition of the missing components must be regarded as an essential activity in all learning experiences. Assessment of learner needs in this regard should be part of every adult learning experience and should concentrate on identifying each individual's strengths and weaknesses, since every individual will have unique past experiences.'* (Brundage and MacKeracher, 1980)

Goals and motivation	*'Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it… Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept they develop a deep psychological need to be seen and treated by others as being capable of self-direction.'* (Knowles, 1990)	*'Adults learn best when they are involved in developing learning objectives for themselves which are congruent with their current and idealised self-concept.'* (Tough, in Brundage and MacKeracher, 1980)
	'Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations… While adults are responsive to some external motivators the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life).' (Knowles, 1990)	*'…for many kinds of learning, the richest resources are in the adult learners themselves. Hence the greater emphasis in adult learning on experiential techniques…over transmittal techniques.'* (Knowles, 1990)
	'Some students are seeking to enhance their chances of promotion or of gaining employment or a change of career; some are seeking to broaden their minds, others feel that they have been unfairly judged by the educational system in the past, and want to prove to themselves that they are capable of academic study. They want to overcome the feeling of 'rejection' by the employment-educational system. Being an adult learner is thus inextricably linked with human change.' (Morgan, 1995)	*'…the learning process is much more than the systematic acquisition and storage of information. It is also making sense of our lives, transforming not just what we learn but the way we learn, and it is absorbing, imagining, intuiting, and learning informally with others. Finally, the context in which learning occurs has taken on greater importance. Not only can we see learning as situated in a particular context, but we can examine how race, class, gender, power and oppression, and conceptions of knowledge and truth shape the context in the first place and subsequently, the learning that occurs.'* (Merriam, 2001)

Self-direction	*'Many students do not perceive themselves as 'students'; rather they are adults with busy lives and fitting in part time study is just one relatively small part of that life.'* (Morgan, 1995) *'…their (learners') personal concept of study has a powerful influence over how they approached learning and what they gained from the course.'* (Morgan and Beaty, 1984)	'For many students, learning revolves around the set assessment, rather than the directions provided in the study materials… Learners will make strategic decisions about whether to complete in-text activities, how to progress through materials, whether to skip sections, or even by-pass the study materials altogether, based on their perception of assessment requirements. This is not necessarily a problem – indeed from an open and distance learning perspective it is highly desirable to encourage these independent and lifelong learning skills. Rather, the question is whether the assessment really engages the learner with the main bodies of knowledge and skills development as intended. In other words, does the assessment meet the aims and objectives?' (Morgan and O'Reilly, 1999)

Activity 1.9 Responding to learners' characteristics

This activity will give you a chance to think about how the characteristics of adult learners apply to the learners you know.

Do you recognise yourself as a learner in any of these quotes?

What characteristics of learners seem most relevant to you?

To what extent do these quotes describe the learners you know?

As an educator, what is your response to the quotes that outline the implications for educators?

COMMENT

Think about individual adult learners that you know (including yourself), or the four 'typical' learners introduced earlier in this unit, and try to relate these commentaries to your observations and experience about adult learners. You may find it helpful to share or discuss your responses to these questions with friends or colleagues.

WHY DO ODL LEARNERS NEED TUTORS?

So far, we have considered issues in ODL from the perspective of those who work in the field. It is essential to imagine the learner's experience of ODL from their perspective: as one educator suggests, to 'think like a learner, then act like a teacher'.

THE LEARNER'S POINT OF VIEW

Here is a description of some of the critical incidents that have formed part of the learning experience of Nelson, an ODL student in South Africa. Read the description and then complete the activity that follows.

NELSON'S STORY

1   Nelson is a first-time distance learner, and has received a package of course materials, which he opens. The pack is huge, and contains two ring binders (a portfolio binder and a resource pack) together with several smaller documents on library access, marking schemes, key assessment dates, and a guide to basic study skills. He's not sure where to start.

2   Nelson begins to read the course materials and tries several self-assessed activities, but his answers don't seem to match those provided in the study guide. He is even more worried that, although the course materials are in his language, parts seem incomprehensible, and he thinks it may have been foolish to start this course or assume he could return to learning. The tutor probably won't even want to discuss the course with someone who is so obviously unprepared for it.

3   After sorting out and reading the materials, Nelson feels most of it is fairly clear, although sometimes they seem to go on and on about one point, but then deal with another very briefly. Nelson is thinking about his assignment, but is confused because the optional assignment topic that interests him most is one dealt with very briefly in the course material, which suggests it is not important.

4   Nelson completes and submits his assignment. Although he successfully located some additional resources on the topic, he is unsure that he used them in the best way and so attaches a note to his tutor asking about this and several other things puzzling him.

5   Nelson is one of four people working on a group assignment. He is in regular contact with two others and they feel that they have made good progress on their parts of the

project. Despite repeated attempts at contact, little has been heard from the fourth person and Nelson is worried that that person has done little on their part of the project.

6 Nelson's employer will sponsor him to take a short course relevant to his ODL degree, which he would like to get academic credit for. However he doesn't know how to go about this or which department to ask.

7 Nelson has now completed four courses in a five-course programme, and must select, and register for, one of two final courses before the deadline. One is a 'capstone' course that brings together the themes covered in the previous courses, while the other covers in depth a particularly interesting topic from a previous course. Nelson is not sure which to choose.

Activity 1.10 What would you want a tutor to do?

This activity is an opportunity to consider why learners need tutors, from the learners' point of view.

Keeping in mind the principles of ODL that we have discussed, put yourself in Nelson's situation, and write in the table below what you would want a tutor to do in response to each of the seven critical incidents in Nelson's experience, and how that would help. You may wish to make more detailed notes and reflections elsewhere.

Critical incident	What would you want a tutor to do?	How will this help?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

Reflect on your responses or discuss them with colleagues and then try to complete the sentences below.

ODL learners need tutors because…

_____

ODL learners need tutors because…

_____

ODL learners need tutors because…

_____

ODL learners need tutors because…

_____

COMMENT

Your reflections and discussions may have identified a variety of learners' expectations of tutors, and some creative ideas about how tutors could address each situation. You will probably have arrived at some common ideas about the different types of support that tutors can provide.

THE TUTOR'S ROLE

Now that you have identified some of the reasons why learners need tutors, and the kind of support that tutors can provide, you can look at the tutor's role in your context.

Activity 1.11 Tutor roles and responsibilities

This activity will help you define tutors' responsibilities in your context. The table below identifies and describes some of the academic, administrative and support responsibilities of ODL tutors. Place a tick in the right-hand column against those that apply to tutors in your context. If tutors in your context have any additional responsibilities, add them at the bottom of the table. If you are working on your own, try to get some feedback on your answers from others in your context so that you can clarify and compare your perceptions of the tutor's role.

Role	Responsibility	Applies
Academic advising	Advising learners about course choice, options for continuing or completing a study programme	
	Advising learners about courses for specific qualifications or career choices	
Academic instruction and coaching	Responding to questions from learners	
	Clarifying course materials when necessary	
	Developing additional resources or tutorial materials	
	Helping learners develop specific skills	
Academic facilitation	Providing remedial help, or advice on where to obtain it	
	Providing information about additional resources for learners who want to pursue a particular interest in greater depth	
	Planning and guiding discussions among learners, whether face-to-face, or mediated through a conferencing technology (audio, video, computer)	
Academic assessment	Setting assignments for learner assessment	
	Clarifying assignment tasks and options to learners	
	Assessing, grading and providing feedback to learners on their assignments	
	Setting examinations	
	Marking examinations	
Maintaining supportive communication with learners	Initiating contact with learners at the start of the course	
	Maintaining regular contact with learners for the duration of the course	
	Helping learners address issues that may impede their progress in the course	
Administrative record keeping and communication with administrative staff	Verifying student records at the beginning of the course	
	Maintaining accurate records of each learner's work, including assignments and exams, and submitting these records to the appropriate department	
	Learning about administrative procedures and deadlines that affect learners, such as procedures and deadlines for changing or withdrawing from a course	
Other		

COMMENT

If you are a tutor, then your responses should help you to reflect on the nature of your role. If you work with tutors as a course author or as an administrator, your conclusions can form a starting point for discussions with tutors about their roles and responsibilities.

WHAT KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS DO TUTORS NEED?

Now that you have identified tutors' responsibilities and some of the tasks they take on in your context, you have prepared the groundwork for identifying the knowledge and skills that tutors need to carry out these responsibilities.

Activity 1.12 Tutors' knowledge and skills

In the left-hand column of the table below are listed three areas of tutorial responsibility and the aims of those areas. In the middle column, list the specific responsibilities that a tutor in your context has for the area listed in the first column; in the right-hand column, list the knowledge and skills that tutors need to fulfil these responsibilities.

Area of responsibility and aims	Specific responsibilities	Knowledge and skills
Academic – to help learners to understand content and its relationship to their learning goals		
Support – to help learner deal with personal, family or contextual issues that may affect learning		
Administrative – to provide a link between learner and institution; ensure accountability between learner and institution		

COMMENT

Here is one tutor's summary of her academic responsibilities and her analysis of the skills and knowledge that she needs.

Area of responsibility and aims	Specific responsibilities	Knowledge and skills
Academic – to help learners to understand content and its relationship to their learning goals	1) Help learners to develop and apply appropriate learning processes effectively	1) Knowledge of the subject matter; ability to communicate with learners in a clear, helpful and friendly manner
	2) Provide fair, timely and helpful feedback to learners on their assignments	2) Ability to assess and convey the strengths and weaknesses in learners' work and determine how best to respond to learners' needs; knowledge of the academic criteria for each grade level (e.g. A, B, C, etc.)

Your list probably includes knowledge and skills needed by teachers in conventional, face-to-face learning, as well as the added dimension of knowledge and skills that are more specific to ODL. For example, the ability to communicate with learners in a clear, helpful and friendly manner is important in face-to-face learning. ODL tutors also need the skills to sustain good communication through less frequent contact at a distance, by using written messages, telephone, audiotape, email and so on.

WHAT KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS MUST TUTORS BRING TO THEIR WORK?

The last activity should have shown that people with teaching experience already have a lot of the knowledge and skills of effective ODL tutors. ODL tutors need a wider range of knowledge and skills because of the different approaches of ODL, the profiles and goals of ODL learners, and the use of distance communication strategies.

ODL approaches

In ODL, the tutor is a facilitator of learning rather than an instructor. The course materials or learning resources provide the content, while the tutors help learners to develop the skills needed to comprehend, assimilate and apply the content. Tutors may suggest how learners

approach and work with the content, and sometimes give clarification, but they rarely present content by directly instructing the learners. This may require a rethinking of our approach to learners in the ODL context.

ODL learners

As we saw in Activity 1.8, the characteristics and goals of ODL learners may differ from those of learners in a conventional classroom. Hence tutoring strategies must meet the needs of learners balancing learning with other demands in their lives.

Communication strategies

Communicating over distance changes the impact of tutors' messages to learners. If you communicate in writing with learners, they do not have the visual or auditory cues of face-to-face communication. Many technologies used for communicating with learners operate asynchronously – the message is sent and received at different times. Tutors must be aware of how the chosen technology affects their interaction with learners, and plan their communication strategies with care.

PLANNING THE DEVELOPMENT OF ODL TUTORIAL SKILLS

If you are developing your own learning plan, your next step is to identify which ODL knowledge and skills you already have, which ones you need to adapt for ODL, and which new areas you will need to add to your current knowledge and skills. If you are planning tutor training for others, the same process applies, but you will need to do some research by talking with tutors and their supervisors to find out the knowledge and skills that tutors have and those they need to develop.

DEVELOPING A LEARNING PLAN

There are many ways of structuring and arranging the information and outcomes from a skills development planning exercise, but the next activity provides you with one suitable framework.

Activity 1.13 Develop a learning plan

This activity will help you to develop your own learning plan or develop a plan for training tutors. You can use the charts below as guidance for reflection, discussion and planning.

In each area, identify the skills that tutors need, and write these in the first column. Then, in the appropriate column, say whether they, or you, already have, need to adapt, or need to add these skills, with brief notes on where the particular needs lie. In the final column, 'Strategies for learning', enter strategies that will enable tutors to develop these skills; for example, workshops, working closely with a more experienced tutor, self-study programmes.

If you are working alone, develop your own plan and then set it aside for a few days before reviewing it. If possible, get some feedback on your plan from a colleague. If you are using

the charts to plan the basics of a programme for training tutors with similar backgrounds and skills, you should review your training plan with typical tutors and supervisors to obtain their feedback.

Academic knowledge and skills needed	Already have	Need to adapt	Need to add	Strategies for learning

Support knowledge and skills needed	Already have	Need to adapt	Need to add	Strategies for learning

Admin knowledge and skills needed	Already have	Need to adapt	Need to add	Strategies for learning

COMMENT

This is how one tutor completed the first section of her plan.

Academic knowledge and skills needed	Already have	Need to adapt	Need to add	Strategies for learning
Knowledge of the subject matter	Yes, but not sure how to help distance learners connect with the subject matter	Consider how to encourage learners to apply first module to their own situation	Need more knowledge about learners' context, so can help them with the application side	Review learners' application forms, discuss learners' context with administrators or tutors who know them. Read about developing appropriate learner activities in *Assessing Open and Distance Learners* (Morgan and O'Reilly, 1999)
Ability to communicate with learners in a clear, helpful and friendly manner	Yes, but find it easier to talk to learners than to write to them	Develop communication skills for more written rather than verbal communication	Skills in communicating in writing with learners for different purposes – providing information, assessment	Talk to experienced tutor about how to write to learners
Ability to assess and convey the strengths and weaknesses in learners' work and determine how best to respond to learners' needs	Yes, but find it easier to do this in person	Adapt assessment techniques to include more detail and suggestions for improvement		Practise marking sample assignments and discussing them with experienced tutors
Knowledge of the academic criteria for each grade level (e.g. A, B, C, etc.)	Yes, but not sure how to communicate this to learners	Learn how to convey academic criteria clearly to learners		

Reviewing or discussing your learning plan may make you think of other items to add to it. You can use the plan to improve your ODL tutoring skills and knowledge. As you complete more units, revisit the plan and add to it, or change the emphasis on some aspects.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF AN IDEAL TUTOR

Although it may not be possible to attain perfection, we can strive for the ideal, in tutoring as in other aspects of life!

Here is a description of the ideal tutor based on feedback from both learners and tutors.

'The ideal tutor is a paragon: she or he is consistent, fair, professional in standards and attitudes, encouraging but honest, unbiased, kind, positive, respectful and accepting of students' ideas, patient, personal, tolerant, appreciative, understanding and helpful. Marking by a tutor of this sort will provide the best possible feedback, a crucial, and for most learners, central part of the learning process. This tutor or instructor:

- *provides clear explanations on his or her expectations and marking style*
- *welcomes extra questions*
- *"locates one's faults but corrects them kindly" says a student, "and she explains why marks have been lost or awarded"*
- *makes thorough but cheerful and constructive comments (in contrast with another student's plaintive remark: "the comments left one feeling criticised, threatened and nervous")*
- *gives an extra boost to encourage a student in difficulties*
- *clarifies points which have not been easily grasped or correctly learned*
- *is helpful in achieving the student's objectives*
- *offers flexibility when it is needed*
- *shows a genuine interest in motivating learners (even those who are beginners and so perhaps at a less interesting stage for the tutor)*
- *writes all corrections legibly and at a meaningful level of detail*
- *above all returns assignments promptly.*

So it seems the ideal tutor or instructor is the one who treats his or her students as s/he would want to be treated, who is approachable as a real person (signs the assignment comments, responds to letters and phone calls promptly and without fail) and who provides the most extensive and encouraging comments.

"The extra time and care that X took in marking this course have been much appreciated."'

(Haag, 1990)

Activity 1.14 Your tutorial qualities

List the three characteristics of the ideal tutor that you value most as a learner.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

List three characteristics of the ideal tutor that you would like to enhance in yourself.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

COMMENT

The description above is an ODL educator's view of the 'ideal' tutor. You might find it interesting to compare your answers to the two parts of this activity with the development needs that you outlined in your learning plan.

SUMMARY

Now that you have developed a clearer picture of ODL and considered the role of the tutor, it is valuable to reflect on the work you have done in this unit before moving on to the next.

Make sure you are comfortable with what we have covered in this unit. If you are uncertain about any aspect, go back and review the relevant part of the unit to make sure that you are happy with your understanding of the:

*   elements of a good learning experience

*   differences between ODL and traditional learning

*   key characteristics of ODL

*   nature of ODL learners

*   role, knowledge and skills of the ODL tutor

Your understanding of these should have been illuminated by our consideration, in the text and the activities, of:

*   the impact of an individual teacher or tutor

*   support and guidance needs of learners

*   how learners' needs determine educators' strategies for planning learning and responding to learners

*   the significant features of ODL and their implications for the role of the tutor

*   tutors' responsibilities to ODL learners (academic, supportive and administrative)

*   the need for guidance and enabling of learners, rather than direct instruction

*   the tutor's role in ODL, and the 'ideal' tutor.

If you are new to tutoring in ODL (or if you work with tutors who are new to ODL), bear in mind the need to expand knowledge and skills in order to address learners' needs more effectively. Because each ODL situation is different, and each person brings different experiences to the task of tutoring in ODL, tutors need to develop individualised learning plans by identifying the skills and knowledge they bring to the situation and the skills and knowledge they need to develop or acquire.

UNIT 2:
CORE ODL TUTORING SKILLS

In this unit we will examine the core skills required for ODL tutoring, and their relationship to tutors' roles and responsibilities. You will explore the skills in more depth in later units.

In Unit 1, you began to develop a tutor skills learning plan, using the activities to identify the range of skills needed for your situation. In Unit 2, you will refine your learning goals into discrete skill areas.

OBJECTIVES

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the four core categories of ODL tutoring skills

- summarise the supporting skills needed by an ODL tutor

- summarise the skills needed by an ODL tutor for guiding learning

- summarise the skills needed by an ODL tutor for enabling learning

- summarise the administrative skills needed by an ODL tutor

- identify the aspects of tutor roles and responsibilities that require supportive, guiding, enabling and administrative skills.

WHAT ARE THE CORE ODL TUTORING SKILLS?

When we asked experienced ODL educators, 'What are the core skills required for effective tutoring in ODL?' they identified four general categories:

- *supportive:* helping learners deal with issues not related to content, that may affect their learning

- *guiding:* helping learners to understand the content and its relationship to their learning goals

- *enabling:* helping learners to develop and apply appropriate learning processes effectively

- *administrative:* serving as a link between learners and institution on administrative issues.

In Unit 1, we grouped tutor skills under three categories, academic, supportive and administrative. Here, we have refined the academic skills into two significant skill domains: guiding and enabling.

Activity 2.1 The tutor's perspective

This activity is based on the situations described in Activity 1.10. Here, we will consider them from the ODL tutor's perspective in order to explore the range of skills that tutors need.

For each scenario in Activity 1.10:

*   describe how you would respond as an individual tutor, and what you would hope to achieve with your response

*   list the skills that tutors would need in order to respond appropriately.

For each of the scenarios you have considered, assess:

*   which situations you could handle with your current skills

*   which situations need skills that you would like to acquire or enhance.

Add your notes on your skill development needs to your learning plan that you prepared in Unit 1.

COMMENT

If you are working on your own, if possible, discuss your conclusions with a friend or colleague. In Unit 1, you thought about these situations from the learners' perspective. You should keep your earlier conclusions in mind to help you as you consider these situations from the tutor's viewpoint.

THE CORE ODL TUTORING SKILLS IN PRACTICE

We will examine what is involved in each of the core skill groups and how tutors use them. Don't worry if you feel that the different groups overlap or that, in your context, you would categorise some of them differently. Our grouping is intended to provide a framework in which we can examine the skills, so if it makes sense to you to consider 'motivation' under Guiding rather than Supporting skills, then by all means do so. What is important is to think about the implications of these skills for practice, not to fit them unnaturally into neat categories. Your answers to the activities will provide information and insights that you can incorporate into your learning plan.

'Students and tutors will find affinities on a human level that arise out of conversation… Underneath the structures of courses, assignments and schedules … lies a range of potential human relationships which will assert themselves, whatever managerial structures encompass them in human and rational terms.'

(Tait, 1996)

SUPPORTING

This core skill group is presented first because:

- it is a continuing element that sustains learners throughout the ODL experience
- it differs in nature and intensity from the level of support typically required of teachers in conventional face-to-face contexts.

This is how one learner described the importance of tutor support:

'I have to share with you my deep appreciation for the excellent work of my tutor. His continuous support in the process of my learning and his regular feedback on my work really helped me a lot to finalize the course. I particularly appreciate all his efforts made in making the process of learning relaxing and even entertaining. I believe that his supportive, personal and sometimes humorous way of communication with students should be used as a formula in all distance courses that could in the beginning look very cold and depersonalised.'

(Learner in *Writing Effectively for UNHCR*)

In ODL, 'learner support' is used in different ways, which can be confusing. It is often used as a very general term to refer to all the activities that an educational institution does to recruit, enrol, guide, tutor, counsel and communicate with learners. Thorpe (2002) defines learner support as:

'all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process'.

However, when we speak of the tutors' role in supporting learners, we mean a much more specific set of responsibilities and skills. These require personalised contact with individual learners to help them sustain their commitment to the learning process and address issues in their lives that might impede learning.

Thorpe's reference to a 'known learner or group of learners' is still relevant to ODL tutoring because tutors know their learners, in contrast to the writers of the course materials, who may know the general characteristics of the learners, but may never encounter them as individuals. Hence tutors are best placed to adapt support strategies to meet the specific needs of their learners.

Through regular contact and feedback, tutors maintain an 'ongoing hum of awareness', demonstrating that they are aware of their learners even if the learner has not contacted them, or whether the learner is engaged in their studies or worrying because these have been disrupted.

For a tutor, supporting skills include:

- communication

- motivation

- problem solving.

COMMUNICATION

Good communication is key to supporting ODL learners. It includes:

- listening

- responding

- maintaining contact

- effective use of communication media.

These must be matched by the ability to identify potential barriers to communication and to view issues from the learners' perspective.

'Interaction, specifically interpersonal interaction, is key to all main theories of learner support because it is the only way of addressing the needs of learners in the terms in which those learners wish to express themselves.'

(Thorpe, 2002)

Listening skills are important whether you are listening to a learner's voice or to a learner's message in written communication. The tutor must interpret both the explicit and implicit messages. For example, a learner who says, 'I'm not sure that I am using this formula correctly' may be explicitly asking for an explanation of the formula and implicitly for reassurance that

it is within his or her capabilities. You can confirm that you have understood the learner's message correctly by interpreting, clarifying and restating it. You may then need to respond on two levels:

• to the explicit question; 'Here is a brief explanation of how this formula is applied'

• to the implicit message; 'Since you have already successfully applied the first two elements, I'm sure you'll be able to manage the rest of it now'.

A good tutor will deal with learners' issues or questions in a timely and constructive manner. Contact should be regular and supportive so that learners feel able to raise questions or issues that they may otherwise feel 'not important enough' to present to their tutor.

'Essentially any contact with tutors seemed to build confidence and motivation, and it regularly acted as a sort of routine check whereby they could reassure themselves they were still pointed in the right direction.'

(Rickwood and Goodwin, 1997)

Distance educators' intuitive belief in the importance of tutors maintaining contact with learners has been confirmed by recent research. A study of vulnerable learners at the UK Open University found that those contacted by their tutors before the first assignment was due were more likely to submit their assignment and a larger proportion of this group received A or B grades on their assignment (SSRG, 2002). Vulnerable learners included those:

• embarking on university studies for the first time

• with low prior qualifications

• who had withdrawn from or failed a course

• with special needs

• who registered late

• whose tutors had identified as having study problems

• who had received a financial award, indicating economic difficulties.

Learners in this study also indicated that it was important that it was the tutor who contacted them, not someone who was unfamiliar with them or the course. Here are two learners' comments:

'The contact from my tutor was extremely helpful in giving me encouragement and a real person to talk to.'

'Being geographically very distant from my tutor I felt it was good he contacted me and enquired about my progress. I was pleasantly surprised and felt confident that any further queries will be treated sympathetically.'

(SSRG40/2002)

Communication technologies are an essential facilitating tool for the ODL tutor. Their effective use requires ODL tutors to understand the effects of distance and technology so that they can choose the right delivery method for the message, and design messages to make the best use of the technology. For example, it is much better to convey detailed information in print rather than over the phone, so that the learner can refer to the printed message later on and not have to try to take extensive notes during a phone conversation. The most commonly used media for communicating with learners in a supportive role are print, telephone, email, and computer conferencing. However, if learners are using a computer technology for the first time, it is better to provide initial instructions in print so that they are not left without any means of communication.

Recognising potential barriers to communication can be a challenge, because the clues that there is a barrier may be very subtle or difficult to interpret, or a learner facing a communications barrier may simply not get in touch.

Barriers to communication can be caused by:

- cultural differences between learner and tutor

- incomplete knowledge of the language of instruction

- subtle language differences, such as dialect or common usage

- a perception of tutors as unapproachable

- a disability that impedes learners from speaking or writing fluently.

If your educational institution has specialists who can help with disability issues, you may find it helpful to consult them about diagnosing and planning a suitable approach.

Activity 2.2 Using communication skills

How have you used communication skills in your teaching practice or other areas of your work?

Do you think you will need to use any of these skills differently for tutoring in ODL and, if so, how?

COMMENT

You may need to take account of several characteristics of the ODL context that will affect how you use communication skills in practice. You cannot rely on immediate feedback from body language, for example, if there are no face-to-face meetings with students. You may, therefore, have to be more rigorous about clarifying the level of a student's understanding.

MOTIVATION

Teachers of adult learners sometimes ask, 'Why would I need to motivate learners who have chosen to study?' Providing motivation is an important tutoring skill because ODL learners face many challenges and they may need extra encouragement to tackle these challenges. Motivation, along with communication and problem-solving skills, can encourage learners to develop strategies for coping with difficulties that affect their learning. As well as motivating students to address specific problems, good tutors will incorporate encouraging messages in their regular communication with learners.

PROBLEM-SOLVING

Skills in identifying and solving problems are an essential. They include the ability to:

- clarify problems
- identify what kind of help is needed
- determine whether you can and should provide help.

Problems that tutors typically encounter include:

- academic problems; difficulties in:
  - understanding the course content
  - completing the course work
  - mastering the skills required for the discipline.
- conflicting demands of work or family that mean that learners may sometimes be unable to dedicate time to study
- time management problems; in contrast to the above, this means learners' difficulties in:
  - organising their time
  - planning a study schedule
  - anticipating and working towards deadlines.
- personal problems, such as a family illness or loss of a job, that affect the learners' ability to focus on studies.

We will address academic problems in more detail under the sections on guiding and enabling learning. The tutor is likely to be the first person the learner contacts about a problem or the first person to recognise that there is a problem. You don't need to solve every problem, but you should help learners obtain the help they need. Your role will depend

on the resources available in your context: you may need to refer learners to an academic advisor, a study skills or time management workshop or counselling service. Tutors also need to communicate with other staff about delayed assignments, requests for temporary suspension of studies, and so on.

Some problems may be outside your area of expertise or your mandate as a tutor and one aspect of problem solving is deciding what you should not do. You may feel it's important to listen to a learner who is clearly in distress but, if the learner is facing personal problems, you may quickly find yourself out of your depth. Counselling is a specialised role and you should refer learners to the appropriate resources if possible. The dictum of one experienced tutor is, '*If your sixth sense tells you that you shouldn't tackle a situation, you probably shouldn't.*'

Other tutors have described problem solving as 'rescue and retrieval': helping learners on the brink of giving up their studies to find ways to manage their workload, plan their learning activities or deal with learning crises.

Activity 2.3 Using problem-solving skills

How have you used problem-solving skills in your work with others, or in teaching?

What strategies have you learned that lead to effective problem solving?

How can you apply or adapt these strategies for tutoring in ODL?

COMMENT

Your strategies for problem solving may need to become more proactive in an ODL context, for instance informing students of dates and administrative procedures, rather than waiting to deal with the same concern from several students independently.

GUIDING LEARNING

Guiding is the term we use to refer to activities that help learners understand and apply content. This is how a tutor's work in guiding learning affected one student:

'Your explanations and comments were very clear to me. The idea of working in smaller sections and using simple language is not only to be clear, but to express a message in a language you are not proficient in. This situation forces you to find the short way to communicate effectively.'

(Learner in *Writing Effectively for UNHCR*)

THE SKILLS INVOLVED IN GUIDING LEARNING

- using content knowledge to provide direction
- providing feedback to learners on their work
- familiarising learners with the conventions of the discipline
- linking
- academic problem solving.

USING CONTENT KNOWLEDGE TO PROVIDE DIRECTION

This involves helping learners find their sense of direction through the content by:

- providing signposts that they can use to organise their ideas
- suggesting additional or alternative sources of information
- presenting different ways of looking at issues.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO LEARNERS ON THEIR WORK

This is probably the most visible and time-consuming aspect of the tutor's role. Tutors need to be skilled in:

- establishing and communicating clear expectations for learners' work
- identifying strengths and weaknesses in the way that learners have handled the work
- identifying the areas of the content that they have understood and the areas that are less clear to them
- suggesting strategies for building on what they know and for enhancing their skills.

Providing good feedback to learners requires both guiding and enabling skills.

FAMILIARISING LEARNERS WITH THE CONVENTIONS OF THE DISCIPLINE

Every discipline has its own conventions. For instance, written work is presented in a different way in English than in Psychology. As a tutor, you may be so familiar with these conventions that they are second nature to you, but learners may not be aware of them. Your role may involve familiarising learners with:

* the way ideas are developed and presented in your discipline
* acceptable and unacceptable strategies for research
* specific requirements of writing and reporting in your field.

LINKING

Most learners want to make connections, to understand how pieces of learning relate. Adult learners are particularly interested in the implications and applications of what they are learning. Tutors can help learners to make the connection between the course content and their specific learning goals, and to understand the potential applications of the content to their area of interest. To do this, tutors need to:

* know about the learners' goals and their prior learning
* engage in a dialogue with learners about their understanding and perspective.

ACADEMIC PROBLEM SOLVING

Tutors need to be able to identify academic problems that impede the learner, such as:

* insufficient background in the content area
* lack of access to appropriate resources
* lack of knowledge of how to use resources
* lack of skills in a specific area
* problems with the course materials.

To resolve individual academic problems, tutors may help learners to:

* recognise gaps in their learning
* develop the background knowledge or skills they need
* develop skills in locating appropriate resources or in learning how to use them.

For problems with course materials, tutors may:

* develop remedial resources that enable learners to deal with that section or topic
* recommend changes to the course materials.

Activity 2.4 Using guiding learning skills

Which of the skills needed for guiding learning do you feel are transferable to tutoring in ODL?

COMMENT

All of the skills are transferable to ODL, but the method of interaction or communication media that is used may have to be adapted to suit the particular ODL context.

ENABLING LEARNING

Enabling learning entails helping learners to develop learning skills (general or specific to the discipline) and to apply these skills appropriately as individuals or in groups. One learner described the experience like this:

'I just wanted to say from someone who had little previous knowledge of distance education, that as we have completed two months of our first class, that I am feeling so much more comfortable with the structure of this class. I feel I am acquiring a strong 'foundation' of this discipline and believe that I will continue to build on my knowledge, brick by brick. I know that I was crying out for full autonomy in my learning, but I now know that before I can proceed into full autonomy, I must be given… structure.'

(University of Maryland/Oldenburg student)

Enabling learning involves:
- helping learners to develop their skills in organising concepts, in developing 'mental maps' that enable them to structure their learning in a way that makes sense to them
- helping learners to articulate their ideas in writing or verbally, and to debate them productively
- fostering learners' ability to achieve learning goals through interactions such as cooperative projects or peer feedback
- setting appropriate and challenging topics for learner discussions, helping learners to focus on the topic and providing a framework that develops their skills in managing discussions
- modelling effective learning strategies for learners by demonstrating alternative

approaches to a topic, making the learning process transparent and providing examples of different routes to learning

- problem solving, by helping learners identify and deal with ineffective approaches to learning, or skill deficits blocking their learning, such as language or mathematical skills.

Activity 2.5 Using enabling skills

Which of the enabling skills have you used the most in your work and teaching?

Which would you expect to use most in ODL tutoring?

COMMENT

The enabling skills required will depend on the subject, the student and your context.

ADMINISTRATIVE SKILLS

After a learner enrols, the tutor may be their primary contact with the educational institution. Tutors need administrative skills to manage the link between learner and educational institution and are accountable to both. As one tutor points out, even when tutors cannot solve all administrative problems, they can still encourage learners to try to overcome them:

'When students are dissatisfied, for whatever reason, for the delivery of service provided by the Centre, they believe the tutor should intervene to solve the problem. In many instances, the problem is beyond the control of the administration at the local centre. My role then is to pacify the students and encourage them to focus on the issues at hand…fulfilling their side of the bargain of successfully completing the course.'

(Claudia Drakes, UWI)

On behalf of the learner, tutors use their administrative skills for:

- communication – tutors may be responsible for ensuring that learners are informed of deadlines and procedures for applications, exams, withdrawing from courses, completing requirements, etc.

- problem solving – tutors use their familiarity with academic and administrative procedures when helping learners to connect to the appropriate unit or staff person who can help with specific problems. Tutors may also have a role in addressing situations involving individual learners, such as questions of academic integrity, plagiarism, and so on

- planning – tutors are often in a position to help learners to identify their learning needs beyond the specific course, and to plan the most appropriate path to address their needs.

Tutors also use their administrative skills on behalf of the educational institution for:

- managing and communicating learner information, record keeping, reporting marks and ensuring that information about learners is relayed to the right person at the right time

- maintaining standards of practice by ensuring they are familiar with academic standards and identifying any possible infringement of academic standards, in a way that is fair to everyone concerned.

Activity 2.6 Using administrative skills

Which of your work or teaching responsibilities have required the kinds of administrative skills that are needed for tutoring?

Which of these did you find most challenging?

COMMENT

If you have identified some challenging aspects, you can take various approaches to the issue. You can look at strategies for improving your own skills and knowledge, but you should also remember that there may be other resources within your context that you can bring into play.

THE TUTOR'S ROLE

To conclude this unit, here are one tutor's reflections on the multiple dimensions of her role.

'Being a tutor, I see my role as assisting students in interpreting and understanding the material presented, as well as bringing additional perspectives to the class and thinking through alternatives.

Like the student, I must:

- *keep ahead of the game*
- *attend all scheduled classes. Also, I make it my business to attend all the teleconference sessions*
- *be punctual*
- *be prepared at all times*
- *read documentation / handouts before tutorial session*
- *be able to answer all questions at end of each module.*

I see the following as my responsibilities:

- *acting as a resource person*
- *presenting real life examples to further clarify the information documented in the modules*
- *being familiar with and understanding the material*
- *interpreting / clarifying any aspects of the reading material as required by students*
- *interpreting questions as necessary – one question leads to another*
- *encouraging participation, group interaction, discussion*
- *providing strategies to guide or coax students into creative application of what is learnt*
- *providing honest feedback to students on performance.*

Guiding students to the ultimate goal… successful completion.'

(Claudia Drakes, UWI)

Activity 2.7 Responsibilities

This tutor begins her description of her role by identifying the responsibilities she and learners have in common. What responsibilities do you have in common with your learners?

Claudia's description of her responsibilities includes a wealth of tutoring strategies. How many of these do you employ?

COMMENT

We would expect that you might have a similar set of responsibilities in common with your students, but that your range of employed teaching strategies might vary, through reasons of choice, skill or context.

SUMMARY

Unit 2 has expanded on some of the most important skills that tutors need in four main specific skill areas (supportive, guiding, enabling, and administrative) and explored how these skills help learners to develop confidence, acquire knowledge, enhance their learning skills, and find ways to resolve content, logistical or administrative issues that may impede their learning.

We have progressed from the big picture of ODL, via the role of the tutor, to the skills that tutors need. The view has becoming increasingly focused on your own learning goals – those that match your needs and your context. In the following units we will consider how tutors use skills from all four areas to carry out their responsibilities in facilitating and assessing learning, and how to implement your own learning plan.

UNIT 3:
THE SUSTAINING ROLE OF TUTORS

Unit 3 explores, in depth, tutors' responsibilities and the skills that tutors use when sustaining learners. This role involves less formal interactions, whether initiated by tutors or in response to a learner. We call this the sustaining role of tutors because it encourages learners to continue their efforts over a period of time. Our exploration of the topic is also relevant to experienced tutors, tutor-trainers and administrators.

Use your learning plan to help you to focus on the topics that are relevant to your situation. As you work through this unit, add notes to your learning plan on how to adapt your current skills or add new skills. In the column titled 'learning strategy and timing' make notes about methods for developing specific skills.

OBJECTIVES

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

- initiate and maintain contact with learners

- help learners to deal with obstacles and meet their learning goals

- serve as a link between learners and the educational institution

- understand the importance of maintaining learner records.

SUSTAINING RESPONSIBILITIES OF TUTORS

Whether initiated by tutors or learners, ongoing contact between tutors and learners plays an important role in sustaining learners in many senses of the word sustain: to continue, to support, to nourish. Consistent contact helps learners to feel that they are in a safe learning environment in which they can ask questions, reveal their uncertainties, and explore new dimensions of their studies. Tutors:

'…who are consistently empathic, genuine, accepting and respectful generally develop a more open and trusting relationship with students and facilitate the opportunity for students to develop more open and trusting relationships with each other; the result is usually a climate of collaboration and mutual exchange in the learning process'.

(Poonwassie, 2001)

The main areas of tutors' sustaining responsibilities are in:
- initiating and maintaining supportive contact with learners
- facilitating learning on an as-needed basis
- serving as a link between learners and the educational institution.

Activity 3.1 Making a difference

Here is some feedback from an ODL learner to a tutor:

'Thank you very much for your support and guidance during the course period, without which I would not have been able to complete my assignments. There were times when weeks would pass by without doing my assignments due to exigencies of duty, and your emails always put me back on track. You never know how much I appreciated those emails.'

(Participant in *Writing Effectively for UNHCR*)

How had the sustaining skills of the tutor made a difference to this ODL learner?

COMMENT

This illustrates the importance of sustaining learners by:

- keeping in touch

- being available to help

- answering questions

- helping solve problems that impede learning

- identifying when learners need additional help.

INITIATING AND MAINTAINING SUPPORTIVE CONTACT

One of the most important tutor activities is maintaining contact with learners. Learners consistently stress the importance of contact in their evaluations of distance courses, and research evidence (SSRG, 2002) demonstrates that contact has a significant influence on learners' persistence and achievement.

INITIATING CONTACT

Here is a learner's comment on the value of the first contact:

'I first knew that my application to take the course had been accepted when I received a thumping great package on my doorstep. I opened it right away, but couldn't get any idea of what to look at first. It was like receiving one of those "assemble-it-yourself" furniture kits,

without any clear instructions. I worried about it for several days, without really doing much about it; then I got a message from my tutor. In her message, she introduced herself, told me a bit about the course, and asked if I had any questions. I felt as though someone had thrown me a tow rope, and now I could get myself going on the course.'

Imagine that you are a new ODL learner, and have just received a package of course materials in the mail or tried the course website. What questions might you have about the course or the process of ODL; how would you get those questions answered, and by whom?

On many ODL programmes, there is no obvious equivalent of the 'start date' in face-to-face learning. Some ODL learners do not know when to begin their studies, even if this is stated in their course materials, because they expect someone to tell them when to start. Learners may not realise that they are responsible for initiating their own studies. Even if there is a good introductory section in the course that explains how to schedule studies and begin work, it is important to contact learners near the start of the course, to:

• establish communication

• overcome any reluctance to contact you

• let them know that it's time to start working on the course

• indicate that you are available to answer their questions

• convey your expectation that they will keep in touch with you, ask about problems, maintain their study schedule, submit assignments, participate in tutorials or other activities, etc.

A typical first message to learners might say:

'Welcome to the course in Effective Tutoring. My name is Jane Smith and I am your tutor. I hope that by now you have received your course materials (or accessed the course website) and have had a chance to explore what is in the course. (If you have not yet received the materials, or cannot access the website, please contact [name of course administrator] at …, and send me a copy of your message.)

I suggest you start by looking through the course outline and reading the introduction: make a note of any questions about how to proceed with the course. Then, contact me to let me know that you've received my message and are ready to begin the course. When you contact me, you can ask any questions you have about how to get started. Remember, the start date for the course is (date), and we should have established contact by then.

Best regards,

Jane'

On-line learners are equally interested in finding out the course expectations directly from their tutor:

'Learners also were explicit about their need to have workload expectations explained, revisited, and clarified – "revisited" because this information already appears in its entirety in appropriate places on the program's course Web sites.'

(Conrad, 2002b)

Your first communication sets the tone for future interactions. The style depends on the context, the medium (phone, lettermail, email) and the nature of the course. In some situations you can convey something of your own personality; in others you may need to be more formal and businesslike, but always be friendly and positive. Each time you contact learners, make a note of the date and purpose of contact.

Activity 3.2 Welcoming learners

Compose a suitable, short, welcome message for an ODL learner in your context, and think about how, when and why you would send it.

My message would be:

I would send it by:

I would send it when:

I would send it because:

COMMENT

When composing your message, think how you would respond to the message as a learner. Your message should:

- convey information clearly, comprehensively and appropriately
- request a response
- use a tone that is neither overly formal, nor overly friendly, in order to create an

appropriate level of personal communication with the learner

- let the learner know when, why and how to contact you
- be appropriate for the medium chosen.

MAINTAINING CONTACT

Most learners will respond once you have initiated contact. It is important they understand that your initial contact is not a one-time event, but the start of an ongoing connection. Follow up learners who fail to respond as soon as possible, to find out if they received your message and why they did not respond.

Here is how one tutor conveys his expectations of learner–tutor communication early in a course:

'I try to state clearly why we need to communicate regularly if only to say "I'm still working on the module..." Here is how I put it:

"It would help me a lot (and you too I think) if every once in a while you can send me a very quick email just to let me know how it's going. Because we are separated by great distances and time zones, it is impossible for me to know whether you are staying on schedule or falling behind or having trouble or enjoying the course immensely. In all cases I would love to know. That way I can help out if there's a problem or congratulate you if you're okay.

I don't want you to write me every other day! Once every two weeks will do fine – just enough so that we maintain contact. I am usually in touch with everyone fairly frequently with my little notes, but it's always good to hear back from everyone.

If you're finding you are falling behind, just let me know and I can try to help get you back on schedule. If you're ahead of schedule, let me know so I can brag to my friends about what keen students you are."'

(Smulders, 2001)

Maintaining contact with 'silent' learners

Some learners fail to respond to the contact message, which leaves the tutor uncertain about the learners' situation. Here is how one tutor keeps track of 'silent' learners and maintains contact with them:

'I document all correspondence with students (the date of my last email and whether or not they responded.) For those who haven't responded to my last email, 10–12 days later I go through my "Sent Folder" of my email software, find my last email to that student based on the date sent, and then forward it to the student. I also include a new message, something along these lines: I sent you an email a couple of weeks ago, but have not yet received any response. How's everything going with Module 1? The student receives my

latest email plus a copy of the previous message to which s/he didn't respond. This works well. Most students quickly realize that I would like a response to my progress enquiries and then respond fairly promptly to later emails.'

(Smulders, 2001)

Learners can be reluctant to make contact, especially if they feel they are at fault. One tutor comments:

'There are any number of reasons why people don't respond at first. I have a student who didn't reply for over a month, despite my appeals for a reply, any reply, to my messages. She finally wrote and confessed that she was 'ashamed' about many things: she didn't understand how the course worked; she thought that since she hadn't replied to my first message, she was now in trouble, and she was confused about the nature of the assignments. I don't know why she finally got in contact but it's a good thing, because now she's doing fine and the lines of communication are wide open.'

(Smulders, 2001)

Don't hold back from contacting learners frequently for fear of annoying them. If the learner replies to your welcome message, but gets no further contact, they may assume that it was simply a courtesy, and they were on their own for the rest of the course. Here is how one learner felt about lack of contact:

'I would have appreciated some non-specific encouragement. It was the first piece of marked work I had written for 30 years, and took me about 15 hours (with 3 drafts) to complete. Hopefully the next one will be less daunting.'

(SSRG 40/2002)

Tutor messages to maintain contact can be as simple as:

'Hello. I hope that you are finding Unit 2 interesting and helpful to your particular learning goals. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments on the unit so far.

Best regards, Anna'

Tailoring your message to the stage of learning

There are several stages in the learner's experience of a course, and tutors need to tailor their communications accordingly. These stages run from early enthusiasm and apprehension, through first assignment anxiety (and possibly subsequent assignment and exam anxiety) and into the long haul of the course. This table summarises the stages and how tutors can help (adapted from Haag, 1990).

Stage	Learner experience	What to do to help
Early in the course	Enthusiastic about starting the course; apprehensive about tackling the unknown; uncertain about managing the workload	In your communication with learners at this stage, you can reinforce their enthusiasm (after all, you share their interest in the subject), and reassure them that the course is manageable
Approaching first assignment	They may feel they lack the skills or writing competence to do it, especially if they have been away from learning for some time	Explain that many learners feel uncertain, and they should submit the assignment despite their apprehensions, as the assignment is a learning opportunity in itself: they will learn from doing it, and from the feedback they receive. You may need to provide advice and reassurance for subsequent assignments as well
The course proceeds	Difficulty in maintaining interest and enthusiasm, especially if the course demands more time and skills later on	Let learners know that the course is demanding, and acknowledge the skills and knowledge they have gained in rising to the challenge. Suggest strategies for organising time or setting priorities so that learners can achieve their goals in the time left
Exams approach	Anxiety about exams, especially if they count for a large proportion of the final mark	Provide a general picture of what to expect in an exam, and suggest strategies for preparing for and sitting the exam

Activity 3.3 Keeping in touch with learners

List the strategies you would use to keep in touch with learners at each of the stages in a course as described above. You may want to redefine the course stages to suit your context.

What would you do if a learner didn't respond to your messages, and you had no idea whether the learner was still working on the course or not?

COMMENT

If you do not have any personal strategies or institutional procedures for dealing with these circumstances, you may want to look back at the quotes above for ideas on how to keep in touch with 'silent' learners.

FACILITATING LEARNING

In addition to maintaining the 'hum of awareness', tutors must help learners develop their learning skills. Facilitating learning involves suggesting how learners can develop their own learning path or resolve obstacles to their learning. This requires communication, motivation and problem-solving skills, and an understanding of how learners develop their approaches to learning .

The term 'facilitation' often refers to the tutor's role in group learning, and on-line learning in particular. While tutors may use different strategies to facilitate group and individual learning, the goal is the same: to enable learners to develop approaches to learning that meet their needs and are appropriate to the content and context.

HOW LEARNERS DEVELOP LEARNING SKILLS

Distance educators who researched how people develop learning skills describe the process as follows:

'From our research, skill in learning involves students developing confidence, competence, and autonomy in learning. By competence we refer to the specific activities a student engages in when tackling a particular learning task or a particular course. Part of this competence is concerned with the students' conceptions of learning and intellectual development. The importance of approach to learning is that it is directly linked to the content and quality of learning outcomes.

Skill is a relational concept. It describes the learning of particular content within a defined learning environment in a specific institutional context.

The conceptual model suggests a number of stages through which students move as they

develop skill in learning, with increasing independence from the teacher in terms of both the concept and process of learning. This study suggests that activities which build up confidence in learning and develop more complex conceptions of learning are likely to be the most beneficial in developing the lasting qualities of skill and self-regulation in learning.'

(Morgan and Beaty, 1984)

Activity 3.4 Developing learning skills

What kinds of ODL activities are intended to encourage learners to develop their learning skills?

How does this relational concept of skill apply to your learning about tutor skills?

How does this description of learning stages and increasing independence fit with your experience of learning?

COMMENT

ODL activities that build up confidence in learning and develop more complex conceptions of learning encourage learners to develop their learning skills, acquiring greater independence from the tutor as they do so. Your learning about tutor skills through this guide is influenced by the context within which you are studying it, your pre-existing knowledge and skills and the nature of the guide itself.

'Surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning

Another distance educator who researched students' learning strategies refers to the

distinction between 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning, and describes how to encourage deep approaches to learning.

'When students go about learning tasks they vary in their approach. … (There are) students who seem determined to give back, in essays and reports, exactly what they were given in lectures. Other students strive to develop their own perspectives and syntheses of the subject. This…(difference) most often involves differences in intention: students are trying to achieve different things.

(In the) surface approach, the student reduces what is to be learnt to the status of unconnected facts to be memorised. The learning task is to reproduce the subject matter at a later date (e.g. the exam).

(In the) deep approach, the student attempts to make sense of what is to be learnt, which consists of ideas and concepts. This involves thinking, seeking integration between components and between tasks, and 'playing' with ideas.

Students develop an understanding of what learning is, and what they should be doing when learning, from messages implicit in the way courses are designed and taught. If they are required to be passive they learn to be passive and it can be very difficult to unlearn this later on.'

(Gibbs, 1992)

Activity 3.5 Encouraging a deep approach to learning

How can you tell if a learner is taking a surface or deep approach to learning?

What strategies encourage a deep approach to learning?

COMMENT

A learner taking a shallow approach to learning will simply reproduce material from the course, whereas one taking a deep approach will attempt to see how concepts and

components of the course fit together, and investigate different conjunctions of the materials. A deep approach can be encouraged by using strategies that encourage active learning.

Encouraging learners to develop their learning skills

The research of educators such as Gibbs indicates that tutors can encourage deep approaches to learning with strategies that provide intrinsic motivation, support active learning and learner interaction, and help learners to integrate their existing knowledge with their new learning. These include:

• enabling learners to make choices in their learning

• creating a supportive learning environment

• encouraging problem-based learning

• encouraging reflection on the process and content of learning

• fostering the application of knowledge through learning activities and group work

• providing for learner choices in assessment tasks

• designing assessment that engages problem solving rather than memorising.

As a tutor, you can use these strategies to encourage learners to make sense of what is learned. Students can then adopt an approach that builds a framework for what they learn, rather than simply occupy a temporary structure for the duration of the course. The design of an ODL course may also incorporate some of these strategies, especially those related to assessment. When you review a course in preparation for tutoring, look for ways to build on the facilitative strategies in the course.

Helping learners to make their learning meaningful

Facilitating learning also involves helping learners to individualise their learning experience so that it is meaningful for them. Adult learners typically want to be able to link what they are learning with their life and work experience. Many ODL programmes for workplace learning or professional development include opportunities to apply learning in practice or pursue an area relevant to work or professional interests. You may not be familiar with every learner's work context or specialisation, but you can encourage them to develop skills to:

• relate what they know to what they are learning from the course

• identify relevant resources

• connect with learners with similar interests.

Coaching

Good coaching enables focused skill development through encouragement, detailed feedback, modelling good practice of the skill, correction of errors, and explaining the implications of an error. Coaching helps weaker learners acquire the skills they need to stay

with the course, and exceptional learners to gain greater depth or breadth of learning from the course.

Face-to-face teaching is often directed at the 'average student', with extra help given to weaker students. In ODL, facilitation may involve customising the course for individual learners. Prepared courses and learning resources may not provide additional resources for students with less background knowledge or for stronger students who want to go into more depth. Tutors can address learners' individual needs by providing extra feedback and support, directing them to the appropriate resources or developing supplementary materials. Encourage learners to consider and specify their own needs for additional help as part of developing their own sense of direction for their learning. The extent to which you can provide individualised help will depend on your mandate as a tutor.

Facilitating development of learning skills

You will be more effective in facilitating the development of learning skills if:

- you become familiar with the resources relevant to the course topics and to learners' interests so that you can direct learners to appropriate resources

- you help learners to identify other learners with comparable interests and to make connections with them

- you help learners to develop skills in planning, task assignment, communication and problem solving for group work (where the course design and situation encourages cooperative learning)

- you encourage learner independence and self-direction by offering guidance and providing signposts that enable learners to identify their own learning paths, rather than attempting to manage their learning

- you allow learners to test their skills and abilities, rather than telling them that a particular topic or strategy is 'too advanced' for them.

Enabling learners to deal with obstacles

Facilitating learning also involves enabling learners to deal with obstacles, such as:

- difficulties with content

- course workload

- assessment anxiety

- personal issues.

Difficulties with content

Sometimes learners have difficulty in coming to grips with the course content, and aren't quite sure how to proceed. The guiding principle is to appreciate the learners' situation:

'Remember students are learners – they would not be taking the course if they were

already proficient in the material it contains, and they very often need to learn proficiency in the techniques used in your discipline as well: ABCs to you, novel hieroglyphics to many of them!…

…you are not in some old-fashioned teacher–pupil relationship, but you are one adult with greater specific skills conversing with another adult less skilled in this precise content. Then ask yourself how you normally interact with a peer who wants something from you, and behave accordingly.

By listening, you can often encourage people to come to a solution on their own.

Be prepared to explain patiently and to demonstrate by example how to master the needed techniques, either individually or in the first tutorial, if there appears to be a widespread problem.'

(Haag, 1990)

Another tutor describes the approach she uses if learners are having difficulty with the course materials:

'The course materials have been summarized and fashioned so as to assist students enrolled in the distance education programme. I would consistently cite examples, and point the students to additional readings which help to further clarify technical areas. I also ensure that the exercises or questions presented in the modules are discussed and completed. I would normally probe to find out why the student has not read the material and what are the challenges which the particular student faces, so that I can advise on the best approach.'

(Claudia Drakes, UWI)

Course workload

Getting assignments in on time, and coping with the course workload, may be unfamiliar and difficult experiences to many students, especially where they are balancing learning commitments with, for instance, family or work commitments. If a learner says, *'I'm worried about meeting the deadline for the next assignment, because of a demanding workload'* it's important to find out if the problem is course workload, job pressures, other commitments or lack of confidence about completing the assignment successfully.

A first response could be: *'Thanks for letting me know about your concerns about the assignment deadline. Is the course workload too demanding at this point, or are there just too many other demands on your time? Let me know, because in either case, we should be able to work out a solution.'*

If course workload is the problem, discuss whether the learner is spending too much time on one section, or is having difficulty understanding one part. Reassure the learner that the workload can be made more manageable.

Where learners are lacking confidence:

- encourage them to tackle the problem assignment in manageable chunks

- provide reassurance by referring to what they have accomplished so far.

Where learners have demanding job or family commitments:

- agree a schedule that allows them to meet current commitments

- agree a date by which they will catch up.

Assessment anxiety

Learners can be daunted by assessments or exams, especially if they have been away from formal education for some time. They may have reasons you are not aware of for wanting particular grades or have bad memories of grading from previous educational experiences.

Activity 3.6 Discovering the underlying causes

You receive this message from a learner who achieved a C grade:

'I'm sorry that I haven't been in touch with you lately, but to be honest, I'm not sure I will continue in this course. I found the first part interesting, but I was discouraged by my mark on the first assignment, and I'm not sure if I can do any better the next time.'

How would you respond?

COMMENT

Your approach will depend on the learner's priorities and on what is feasible. Advice must be tailored to the particular situation. First, consider the explicit and implicit content of the message. The learner has told you:

- *implicitly* (by not contacting you) that she was disappointed with her grade

- *explicitly* that she feels it is unlikely that she will be able to attain a mark that she finds satisfactory.

You need to find out why this is important to her. She may need a certain grade level to go on to other courses, be used to higher grades, or simply feel that a C grade is not a good mark. Then, if:

- a C grade is quite an acceptable mark in this situation – tell her so that she is not needlessly concerned
- she wants to strive for a higher grade – discuss strategies to strengthen her grades, eg: focusing on core concepts in the course; concentrating on an area of particular interest
- she lacks essential background knowledge for the course – she may be able to withdraw from the course and take a preliminary course to get the background knowledge needed to take this course successfully.

Personal issues

Many learners choose ODL because it fits with their commitments to family, work or community. Their finely balanced personal and academic lives are easily disrupted by unexpected events like illness, job changes, transport problems or the demands of child or elder care. As a tutor, your regular contact with learners should give you early warning of potential problems. Any changes in the pattern of communication with you, such as missed or cryptic contacts from a previously communicative learner, may indicate a problem that needs investigation.

Your message to the learner – *'Are you okay? Are there any difficulties? How can I help?'* – should express your concern, not make the learner feel guilty. When the learner responds, make it clear that you will try to help, and be positive and encouraging. You may be able to solve the problem right away, or it may take you a few days to identify what you can do to help, especially if the situation requires consultation with administrators, but it helps the learner to know that you are 'on the case'. If other people have to be involved, follow up to make sure that everything is done. If the process will take time, keep the learner informed, and encourage them to keep working on the course in the meantime.

One tutor described her response to the challenges that UNHCR learners face:

'Your empathetic perspective is so important to the participants in this course. I know from personal experience that there are times when I am thinking something along the lines of, "If you [the participant] really want to do this, then it is about time you responded."

Usually, when a response finally arrives, the content of it has such a deep and resounding echo of the human condition, involving either work- or life-related events, it tests me beyond the bounds of those things with which I could cope. Each time that I have decided that I am now impatient, I find myself learning something new about complexities of life lived in an unpredictable world. Sometimes the details paint a political or circumstantial situation that extends beyond my imagination; at other times the sketch disrupts personal lives to an extent with which only the most courageous of individuals could cope.'

(UNHCR tutor)

Another tutor explains how her solution to one learner's problem also helped other learners:

'I had a situation this semester where a student has a child who is very ill. He fell behind with his readings, and his attendance has been poor. I have had to pay a little more attention to him this semester. I promised to do some extra work apart from the scheduled classes for the entire class.'

(Claudia Drakes, UWI)

Helping learners clear obstacles

Some practical approaches to help learners resolve obstacles to their learning include:

- recognising differences among students and adapting your facilitation strategies to meet their individual needs, providing appropriate help to strong and weak students
- getting to know what resources are available to help learners deal with specific problems, e.g. study skills courses, or time management resources
- keeping up-to-date records, for each student, of essential information, as well as background notes on their circumstances
- knowing what interventions are within your domain, and which should be handled by others; for example, which rules or deadlines you can bend or change, and which changes require the approval of other people. This includes learning key dates, administrative procedures and deadlines so that your recommendations to learners are consistent with administrative guidelines and deadlines.

A tutor may be the first person to realise a learner has problems, so it is important to learn the warning signs associated with:

- inadequate background for the level of the course
- lack of study skills
- difficulties with the language of instruction
- time management problems
- learning disabilities
- technology difficulties
- emotional problems
- physical disabilities.

The following activity will help you to do this.

Activity 3.7 Discovering the problem

Each of the following is an indicator that a student may be having problems:

- frequent questions from a learner about the course content or about procedures that are answered in the course materials
- in an advanced level course, a learner's questions indicate unfamiliarity with basic concepts
- lack of coherence in messages
- frequent changing of commitments to complete work by a specified date
- inappropriate communications to tutor or other learners.

What problems do think the learner may be having in each of these situations?

COMMENT

Here are some problems that might have given rise to these indicators.

Indicator	Possible problem
Frequent questions from a learner about the course content or about procedures that are answered in the course materials	Ineffective reading skills Poor vision Learning disability
In an advanced level course, a learner's questions indicate unfamiliarity with basic concepts	Lack of background knowledge Learning disability Memory loss
Lack of coherence in messages	Difficulty with language usage Learning disability Limited computer skills
Frequent changing of commitments to complete work by a specified date	Lack of time-management skills Too many commitments Personal, work or family problems that take time
Inappropriate communications to tutor or other learners	Lack of awareness of purpose of communications in the course Possible emotional problem

The available options will be dependent on your context, but options for assessing the problem might include:

• discussions with learner to help identify the problem

• asking an appropriate professional to help assess the learner's difficulty.

Options for responding to the situation could be to:

• recommend resources that may help, such as study skills guides or workshops

• refer the learner to a prerequisite course or to resources that can provide background knowledge or skills

• refer the learner to a counsellor with expertise in a relevant area, such as learning difficulties.

Providing the right support to help learners overcome obstacles

Here are some common obstacles that learners face, their indicators, and how tutors can get learners the support they need. Depending on the context, tutors may need to notify someone else in the organisation, such as a counsellor, learning specialist or administrator about the problem. The situations summarised below are generic problems that learners may face.

Obstacle	Indicator	Response
Inadequate background	Limitations in the student's assigned work	Respond to learner, notify administration, as soon as problem becomes evident
Lack of study skills	Lack of focus, time problems	Clarify problem with learner Recommend resources on study skills
Difficulties with language of instruction	Lack of understanding in first communications with tutor	Confirm problem is with language, recommend appropriate resources If language difficulty means that learner cannot cope, suggest learner take language course first
Time management	Concerns about lack of time, delays in initial activities, assignment	Confirm problem with learner, advise learner on setting priorities and schedule Refer learner to time-management program Recommend postponing studies until learner has more time

Learning disabilities	Student or advocate may notify tutor, may become evident in learner's work	If possible, request professional assessment to identify nature of problem, based on student's work Respond to learner using strategies recommended by professionals
Technology difficulties	Lack of contact, or intermittent contact	Contact learner by alternative means Request technical support for learner
Emotional problems	Unreasonable reactions to staff, course materials	Not quite in tutor's domain – consult with a professional counsellor about best strategy
Physical disabilities	Student or advocate may notify tutor, may become evident in learner's work	As soon as you realise learner has a disability, consult with staff about appropriate strategies to accommodate learner Contact learner to arrange modifications to meet learner's needs

KEEPING RECORDS ABOUT LEARNERS

Keeping notes and records of all contact with learners in ODL is important because:

- your contact with learners will probably be less frequent than in face-to-face teaching, and your notes will enable you to retrieve information about learners quickly when learners contact you, or when information is required by administrators

- you can refer to your notes when you are considering strategies to help a learner. For example, 'Has limited access to an academic library' will remind you to suggest alternative sources, rather than recommending a specialised research project that requires intensive library research

- other people will rely on you to maintain and communicate up-to-date information about the learners' progress, such as assignment submissions, marks, and any special needs.

Therefore, you will need to keep records to:

- support your work as a tutor so that you can maintain continuity and retrieve learner information when you need it – these will be extensive and document your communications with each learner and each learner's activity

- maintain formal records in a format established by the educational institution, so that this information can be used for official purposes

- keep track of key dates for the course and for the educational institution, such as assignment due dates, examination dates, holidays.

Activity 3.8 Keeping track of learners

What kinds of information should you record in your learner files?

What should you record about learners' personal information, their progress in the course or their interactions with you?

What would a learner file look like?

How often should you review and update your files on learners?

COMMENT

The information you record for your purposes as a tutor will depend on what you need to know about your learners as a tutor. Your basic records will probably include learners' names and contact information, the name of the course, notes about each contact and more extensive notes on assignments. Your master file should identify key dates, texts and other resources for the course, and any specialised requirements. You can develop your own format for a learner file from the sample below.

Course name:	Texts	Tutorials	Assignment Dates	Notes
Effective writing	Good writing practice	Oct 15, 30, Nov. 15, 30	Oct 18, Nov. 1, Nov. 17, Dec. 2	

Learner name	Address, other contact info	Dates of contact	Notes on messages	Assignment notes and marks
Jane Rose	14 Haymarket St. George's	Oct 1, 16, Nov 4,	Missed Oct. 15 tutorial – child ill. Caught up assignments by Oct. 30	A1–75 A2–83 A3–80

To confirm your institution's requirements for record keeping, you may need to consult with administrative staff at your institution. You must ensure that you have identified all the information you need to record, and complied with appropriate data protection legislation in your context.

SERVING AS A LINK BETWEEN LEARNERS AND THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

The tutor is usually the main contact between learner and educational institution, and so is often the first person a learner contacts if needing help dealing with administrative issues. Although your primary role may be academic, you may be asked to perform some administrative duties, or to help learners find the right person to answer their administrative questions.

You need to be familiar with the administrative procedures related to assignment marking and return, forwarding marks, managing deadlines for assignments, exam rescheduling, etc. Your administrative responsibilities and workload will depend on the ODL staffing structure in your institution.

In your role as a link between learners and the educational institution, you will need communication and problem-solving skills, as well as a working knowledge of:

*   academic and administrative regulations governing ODL in your situation
*   guidelines and protocols on which administrative issues you can address and which you should hand on, and to whom
*   the roles of ODL administrators, their areas of responsibility and how to contact them.

Typical topics that tutors may be asked to address in this role include, explaining to learners:

*   the sequence of courses, and the reason for this sequence
*   prerequisites for one or more courses and whether learners can prove they meet these prerequisites through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)
*   the rationale and purpose of the assessment methods used in a course
*   an institutional requirement about a course, programme, or assessment.

Tutors may also have to explain to the institution (to the administrator who would deal with this kind of situation) the situation of a learner who cannot complete their final assignment, due to a family crisis.

The next activity will help you prepare for your role as a link between the learner and the institution.

Activity 3.9 Handling administrative questions

Identify an administrative question you would expect to be asked as a tutor in ODL in your context, and then answer the following.

How would find the answers to this question?

Whom would you contact?

Would you ask your contact person to respond to the learner, or would you convey the contact person's message to the learner yourself?

What timeframe would be reasonable for replying to the learner?

What obstacles might there be in obtaining and communicating the information to the learner?

COMMENT

The time required for this activity will depend on the size and complexity of your institution, and your familiarity with it. If possible, review your questions with an administrator who can help you identify information sources to answer your questions.

SUMMARY

We have discussed the sustaining role of tutors in:

- initiating and maintaining contact with learners

- helping learners to deal with obstacles and meet their learning goals

- maintaining learner records

- serving as a link between learners and the educational institution.

Tutors can prepare for these responsibilities by becoming familiar with courses and ODL administrative systems in their institution and by getting to know learners. Their skills and knowledge must enable them to be:

- proactive in encouraging learning

- responsive to learners' questions and requests for help

- astute in identifying situations that require expert help that is beyond their mandate.

Throughout this unit, we have considered how, as a tutor, you sustain learners by enabling them to:

- define, and focus on, their learning goals

- develop their learning skills

- overcome obstacles to their learning

- build their competence and confidence as learners.

We have seen how learners value their tutors' work and recognise the difference they have made to the progress of their learning. Here is an experienced distance educator's description of what learners deserve:

'Show respect for the realities of learners' lives, for the strength and pervasiveness of the barriers faced by many learners and would-be learners, for the heroic efforts some make to stay in courses and to gain access to technologies.

Pay attention to adult learners' need for time-and-effort efficiencies, for self-esteem and embodied identities, and their diversity of learning styles and learning-to-learn skill levels.

Accept that all educators, as satellites in a learner's universe, need to earn their place.'

(Burge, 2001)

UNIT 4:
ASSESSMENT IN ODL

Unit 4 draws on the writer's experience as a tutor on the course 'Writing effectively for UNHCR' to explore the most visible aspects of the tutor's 'job': assessing learners' work and providing feedback that contributes to learning. Assessment in ODL is typically:

*   a significant part of the learning process

*   of greater impact than in classroom situations

*   the centrepiece of tutor/learner interaction

*   an essential responsibility of tutors.

Assessment itself, both in ODL and in conventional face-to-face education,

'... can be thought of as occurring whenever one person, in some kind of interaction… with another, is conscious of obtaining and interpreting information about the knowledge and understanding, or abilities and attitudes of that other person. To some extent, it is an attempt to know that person.'

(Rowntree, 1977, quoted in Morgan and O'Reilly, 1999)

Assessment is a complex form of communication: intellectual or technical achievements cannot be seen in isolation from the rest of the person, as our skills and knowledge are intrinsically linked to our self-esteem. Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) point out that educational assessment meets the needs of four different sectors:

*   learners – with feedback on their progress, and often with certification of their achievement

*   teachers – with information about how learners are coping with the course and their strengths and weaknesses as learners; feedback on the quality of the course activities and resources, and a mechanism for verifying learners' achievements

*   the institution – with evidence of achievement of stated aims, validation of courses and programmes, and feedback on the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies

*   society – with confirmation that learners have achieved a specified standard and are equipped for certain occupations, and information about the effectiveness of instruction in a particular institution.

OBJECTIVES

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

- appreciate the learners' view of assessment
- understand the purposes of assessment
- describe the features of good assessment practice
- plan effective assignments
- mark ODL assignments
- deal with problems in ODL assessment.

THE LEARNERS' VIEW OF ASSESSMENT

Because assessment has such a significant impact on learners and their progress, we will start by considering assessment from the learners' point of view.

Activity 4.1 Learning through assessment

Think about a situation in which an assessment of your work was a positive experience that helped you to learn a great deal. Your role may have been as a learner, as a staff person, or as an educator; the situation may have been an assessment of academic work, or feedback on a job assignment or on teaching performance.

Consider the features of the situation that helped you to learn, and what the assessor did that was helpful for your learning. From this, possibly in discussion with a colleague, develop a list of the essential features of a good assessment experience.

COMMENT

You may find it helpful to refer back to your notes on Activity 1.1, A good learning experience, especially to any comments about assessment. While you are working on this activity, you may be tempted to think about an unhelpful assessment experience. It's all right to do this, but first consider the positive experience, and identify the positive features. Then you can consider 'what not to do' in assessment, and use your positive guidelines to help you understand why assessment can be unhelpful. Your 'helpful' list may have included:

- a positive attitude from the assessor
- fairness in comments and in the marking scheme
- relevance of comments to the issues and goals of the educational programme or work project
- completeness and coherence of the feedback
- comments on the work, rather than on the person
- relevance of the comments to the learner's needs, context and concerns.

THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK IN ODL

ODL assessment a significant focus of communication between tutors and learners. Assignments often carry more 'weight' in ODL than in face-to-face learning, both technically and perceptually. ODL assessment is often based largely on assignments; in contrast, assessment in face-to-face learning often includes participation in classroom interaction. Teachers in face-to-face situations can use their observations of learners in action as indicators of learners' strengths and weaknesses. Tutors in ODL rely on assignments or subtle messages in other communications with learners for these indicators. In ODL, assessment and feedback serve as:

- a guide to learners about the essential elements of the course

- indicators of learner progress and learner needs

- a focal point of dialogue between learner and tutor

- a means of verifying and validating learners' achievements

- indicators of the strengths and weaknesses of the course materials

- indicators to the educational institution of quality issues.

We will consider each of these goals of assessment in ODL in more depth.

A GUIDE TO COURSE ELEMENTS

Most learners regard assignments as indicators of what is really important in the course, and tailor their learning activities to meet the assignment requirements.

'Learners make strategic decisions about how to progress through materials, whether to skip sections, or even by-pass study materials altogether, based on their perception of assessment requirements.'

(Morgan and O'Reilly, 1999)

Learners, especially ODL learners with many work, life and study commitments, want to make the most of their study time. They look for clues in the course materials, particularly the assignments, about what to learn. Some work strategically, asking 'What will I need to learn in order to do this assignment?' and setting up a study plan accordingly. Some work experimentally, attempt the assignment first, and resort to the course materials when they encounter something they cannot do. Because of this, assignments that are inconsistent with course goals or content may lead them in the wrong direction. As one learner says:

'When I begin a new course, I always check out the assignments first. It doesn't matter what they say at the front of the course, what matters is what you will need to do in the assignments at the end.'

For learners, assignments signpost the completion of sections of the course and provide a structure to the course. It is easier for learners to plan their schedules weekly, towards an assignment deadline, than to schedule over a period of months. Assignments also provide a framework for the content, with opportunities for learners to review and summarise their understanding of topics.

'As I'm working on the course, I try to keep the assignment in mind, thinking, 'how can I use this toward the assignment?' It does help me to focus. After I've finished the assignment, it's not over: I often find that what I learned on that assignment is helpful for the next part of the course.'

INDICATORS OF PROGRESS

Learners and tutors rely on assessment activities to:

- provide a sense of progress
- identify learners' strengths and weaknesses
- diagnose areas needing reinforcement or remedial help.

Importantly for ODL learners, assessment answers the question 'How am I doing?' ODL learners rely on tutor feedback and comments on assignments because they are distanced from the learning context and lack the informal feedback learners get in a face-to-face setting. Adult learners returning to formal learning may not feel confident about their skills and knowledge and so have a greater need for external feedback confirming their competence as learners. As one learner put it:

'Studying the course compared to doing the assignment is like the difference between practicing the sport and playing in match conditions.'

(SSRG/45/2002)

For learners, assessment can:

- identify progress, indicating what has been achieved and what needs to be done
- provide an objective measurement that serves as point of reference for future work
- allow opportunities to ask tutors questions or raise content issues
- illuminate expected standards for assignments
- provide information on additional resources to address weak areas or to pursue topics in greater depth.

Here is how a typical learner sees it:

'I worried all the time that I worked on my first assignment, thinking, "I've been away from this too long, I don't think I can do this…" When I got my first assignment back, I found that my tutor understood what I was struggling with, and recognised that some of my skills were rusty. But the best part was that she not only told me I was on the right track in

most of my work, but explained why I was on the right track. I could then figure out, from what I was doing right, how to tackle some of the things I hadn't done so well.'

Assessment helps tutors to:

- identify individual learners' areas of understanding
- assess study skills, such as 'academic skills' in research, writing, analysis, or technical skills in application of principles to practice
- pinpoint areas of difficulty related to lack of background or a weak skill area, and develop strategies to help a learner deal with this difficulty
- learn more about learners' individual interests and concerns
- identify patterns of errors in the work of learner groups that may indicate problems with course materials or instructional strategies.

This is a typical tutor's perspective:

'I try to give learners an honest response to their work in a way that encourages and helps their learning process. When I review an assignment, I ask myself, "What does this learner need to do or know, and how can I help them get there?" I try to keep a balance between recognising the strong points and pointing out areas that need improvement: most importantly, I want to help them develop strategies they can use to improve their understanding and skills.'

A FOCAL POINT FOR DIALOGUE

Assessment activities provide a focus for instructional and coaching activities. Learners who are reluctant to contact tutors may be happier to ask questions about assignments than general questions about the course. Assignments and assessments should stimulate dialogue about concepts in the course and challenges in the material. Preparing an assignment and getting feedback can start a discussion between learner and tutor or among a group of learners and the tutor.

VERIFYING AND VALIDATING ACHIEVEMENT

Validating ODL learners' achievement through assessment is consistent with conventional face-to-face education. In ODL, where there may be little or no visual contact with learners, there are often additional administrative and academic strategies to verify:

- that learners' work is their own
- the identity of the learner in examinations
- that the learner and the person receiving the credit are the same.

Although there are just as many opportunities for plagiarism in face-to-face learning, these strategies address educators' concerns about the integrity of ODL.

Concerns about validation can be addressed, without impinging on the goals and philosophy of the course, with assessment activities and marking strategies that include:

- assignments that require some input based on learners' experience
- assignments that are cumulative, so that each assignment builds on the previous one
- interlocking components in assignments that have to be consistent in style and theme, such as reflective activities submitted during the course and a learning journal submitted at the end.

INDICATORS OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN COURSE MATERIALS

If learners consistently have difficulty with assessment activities, this can indicate:

- poorly designed assessment tasks
- problem areas in course materials.

Poorly designed assignment tasks may result in widely differing and inappropriate learner responses to an assignment. Assignments that are consistently incomplete in one area may show that the course materials are not clear, or the assessment task is not well based in the course materials.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY ISSUES TO THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

Assessment and its outcomes can provide signals to educational institutions about quality issues, such as the effectiveness of the course, and the appropriateness of prerequisites, admission standards, and completion standards. If a significant number of learners who have met admission standards and completed the prerequisites fail stages of the assessment process, there may be a problem with the course, instructional strategies or advance requirements.

Information gathered from the assessment process can be used to identify problems, to document the effectiveness of course materials or to highlight differences among different tutor groups or strategies.

Activity 4.2 Purposes of assessment

What are the purposes of assessment and feedback, for learners, tutors and your institution, on the courses you are tutoring?

COMMENT

Your list may contain many of the points we have raised above, together with some specific to your course, such as 'Providing specific evidence for the institution of achievement of stated aims'. Retain your list for use in later activities.

FEATURES OF GOOD ASSESSMENT PRACTICE

Having explored the purposes of assessment in ODL, for learners, tutors, and the institution, we can consider the qualities of good assessment practice in ODL.

Assessment practice includes assignment design and assessment strategies. Not all tutors are involved in assignment design, which is often done by course writers, but all tutors should recognise the qualities of a well-designed assignment.

Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) identify the following as elements of good ODL assignment design:

- clear rationale and consistent pedagogical approach
- explicit values, aims, standards and criteria
- authentic and holistic tasks
- facilitative degree of structure (the right balance between direction and flexibility)
- sufficient and timely formative assessment
- awareness of the learning context and perceptions.

We can expand on this to consider the features of assignment design and assessment strategies that support learning and achieve the goals of assessment. They should be:

- fair
- central
- interesting
- useful
- flexible

- clear
- appropriately challenging
- responsive
- effective
- supportive of further learning.

Fairness

In assignment design, fairness means that assignments should be consistent with course content and objectives, and with what learners have been told is important. An assignment should be manageable in the time allocated, with the resources and technologies available to the learner. Assignments should be spaced so that learners can receive and process feedback on previous assignments before attempting the next.

Fairness in terms of learner assessment means assessment strategies that are transparent to learners and provide equal treatment to work of equal value.

Clarity

Clarity in assignment design ensures that the task is easy to understand and unambiguous. In learner assessment, assessment principles and evaluation methods should be presented clearly, and with the assessment task, so that learners can use them as guidelines for the assignment.

Centrality

Assignment design should relate the assessment task to a significant course element, so that it develops and tests knowledge and skills central to the course content. Learner assessment should focus on the goals and essential elements of the assignment.

Appropriately challenging

In assignment design, the assessment task should be such that most learners can do it well, but it must test or develop new skills and knowledge. Learner assessment should be based on reasonable expectations of learners in that context, given the goals, content and level of the course.

Interesting

The assessment task should be intrinsically interesting to learners and worth doing for its own sake, rather than simply requiring completion of irrelevant exercises. Learner assessment should relate to the learners' stated interests and goals, as well as to the course goals.

Responsive to learners' interests

In assignment design, the assignment task should enable learners to pursue some of their own interests or apply their learning to a practical situation or their own context. Learner assessment should acknowledge the learners' efforts to address their specific interests and context in their assignment work.

Useful for the next stage of learning

Assignment design and learner assessment should provide guidance on learning strategies and significant concepts in the next stage of the course or further courses.

Effective

The assignment task should allow learners to demonstrate their understanding of the course content. Learner assessment should accurately identify learners' understanding and skills regarding a significant aspect of the course, and enable tutors to diagnose learners' strengths and weaknesses and provide appropriate feedback.

Flexible

Assignments should be manageable by learners with different levels of knowledge and skills, working at a level that is appropriate to them, by scaling up or down the complexity of the assignment to meet their needs. Learner assessment should be adaptable to learners' needs, whilst maintaining academic standards.

Support further learning and dialogue

Both assignment design and learner assessment should facilitate discussion between the tutor and learner about the learner's work and about concepts in the course.

PLANNING EFFECTIVE ASSIGNMENTS

Here are two contrasting learner responses to assignments:

'The assignment was challenging and interesting, and it helped me to see the connections among all the ideas in the course so far.'

'The assignment seemed to belong to a totally different course: in fact, I even contacted Learner Services to see if they'd sent it with this course by mistake. I was completely frustrated as I worked on it, because it was hard to see how it related to this course at all, and I couldn't locate any relevant resources within the course materials. The whole time I worked on it, I felt that I was being distracted from the goals of the course.'

These highlight the importance of well-planned assignments to a course. Whether or not your tutor role includes planning assignments, it is helpful to know what is involved. A better understanding of the principles of setting effective assignments will help you analyse the goals of the assignments in a course as a basis for your assessment scheme. It will also be of great benefit if you are asked to develop fresh assignments after the course has been offered several times. Tutors are well placed for this as they have a good understanding of how the course materials are used in practice.

ASSIGNMENT TYPES AND LEARNING GOALS

The following table draws on Morgan and O'Reilly (1999), who identify broad categories of knowledge and skills, and suitable approaches to assessing them.

Skills and knowledge	Assignment types	Features
Thinking critically and making judgements	Essays, reports, journals	Requires analysis, development of an argument, coherent presentation
Solving problems and developing plans	Individual or group work on case studies, scenarios	Requires analysis, interpretation, proposing and agreeing solutions, and presentation
Applying technical skills to problem solving	Discipline-specific problem solving (maths, science, engineering, medical fields)	Problems should enable learners to demonstrate skills in problem analysis as well as technical skills in working out a solution
Performing procedures and demonstrating techniques	Lab or workplace assessment, video demonstrations, on-site meetings	Should replicate actual task and context as closely as possible
Managing and developing oneself	Learning contracts, learning journals, portfolios	Requires self-management and self-direction as a learner
Accessing and managing information	Developing a database or annotated bibliography, completing a task that requires assembling information or research data	Fosters research and retrieval skills
Demonstrating knowledge and understanding	Essays, reports	Often assessed along with other skills
Designing, creating and performing	Projects, portfolios, video or audiotapes of performances	Can demonstrate aesthetic judgement and ability, problem solving, technical skills
Communicating	Reports, journals, essays, graphs, charts, visual images, live or taped video or audio debates, presentations, role plays, computer conference discussions	Often assessed along with other skills, for clarity, coherence, appropriateness of method and medium, etc.

Activity 4.3 Design and evaluate an assignment

Design an assignment for the course you are tutoring. Your assignment plan should include:

- the rationale for the assignment
- learning goals (skills, knowledge)
- how it fits with the goals and objectives of the course
- the resources learners need to complete it
- an assessment of the resources available to learners, including any limitations in access to library, technologies, etc.
- how long it will take learners to complete
- assessment criteria and methods
- how you will describe the assessment scheme to learners
- benefits of the assignment and the assessment of learners' work.

COMMENT

Your assignment should draw on several of the areas of skills and knowledge listed in the chart above. Your assignment should:

- meet the purposes that you listed for assessment in your course in Activity 4.2
- have the qualities of good assignments and good assessment that you listed in Activity 4.1
- have the features of good assignment design discussed earlier.

Even if you do not use the assignment you have designed for your course right away, you can learn a great deal about tutoring and assessment from the practice of developing an assignment and ensuring that it meets the principles of good assessment.

THE ART OF MARKING ASSIGNMENTS IN ODL

Imagine that having completed your work on an activity in this handbook, you sent it to a distant tutor for feedback. It could be me, the author of this handbook, whom you have never met. This is the situation of an ODL learner. As a learner, what would you expect from a distant, and possibly unknown, tutor?

If the assessment is given only in writing, you might feel you missed out on visual or auditory cues, or the chance to respond or ask questions of the assessor. On the other hand, the message in a written assessment may be clearer and easier to interpret. As we explore the art of marking in ODL, you will see how to sustain the positive elements of effective marking in ODL. Rickwood and Goodwin (2000) noted that marking takes on added dimensions in ODL because it is:

'…the main building block of the student/tutor relationship'.

They also noted that:

'Assessment taught (learners) a lot, about the discipline needed in working to a schedule, about being realistic in terms of the effort they could devote to a task, and about making their first autonomous efforts at understanding the course material.'

LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS OF TUTOR ASSESSMENT

Typical of learner expectations of tutors in the assessment process are:

* acknowledgement and confirmation – to acknowledge receipt of work and to let them know that it was complete or if there was something else they needed to complete so it could be marked

* thoroughness – to take the time to read their work thoroughly and to comment on it thoughtfully, to an appropriate level of detail

* opportunity for clarification – to tell them if any elements of the context and background of their work are not clear, so that the learner has an opportunity to clarify them

* respect – to treat them with respect, which means helpful, constructive feedback, designed to support their progress as a learner, with criticism directed towards their work, not towards themselves as individuals, and to be clearly intended to help them as learners

* timeliness – to respond promptly, so that they can consider and apply feedback to the next stage of their learning.

Activity 4.4 What learners expect from tutor assessment

What, as a learner, would you expect from a tutor who was marking your work?

COMMENT

Your response may depend your individual experiences, but will probably include some of the elements discussed above.

Here is how one learner described what she valued in tutors' assessments of her work:

'I always took guidance from the tutors' comments. I used to write my assignments in the light of their remarks. Their comments and suggestions guided me not only in my

assignments but in the examinations as well.'

(Samina, quoted in Kanwar, 2002)

Learners do not appreciate dismissive, minimal or obscure comments. One learner describes her dissatisfaction with a tutor who initially commented on her assignments as a whole, but later simply ticked points of agreement:

'My experience with a different tutor in the previous year had led me to expect an illusion of a conversation within the text itself. Frequent comments within the text construct the reader as a collaborator and set the pattern for future interactions…The option to submit drafts…would have provided more opportunities for two-way conversation to develop than actually transpired.'

(Roberts, 2003)

The learner's response is supported by recent research:

'A recent study at the Open University suggested that maintaining motivation was the most important and influential issue for students for the first assignment in a course. If a student was looking for encouragement and only received corrections of errors this may not have supported their learning well.'

(Gibbs and Simpson, 2002)

Activity 4.5 Appraise a tutor's approach to marking

Here are two samples of tutor feedback to a learner's assignment. The essay excerpt is from: Dewey, J. (1915) The School and Society, 2e., Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pages 28-9.

Tutor one

John, your essay shows a far-reaching concept of the relationship between education and society, and of the potential of recreating a healthy society within the school. You have made a very good start towards articulating your visions of the goals of education. However, you will need to develop these ideas further by demonstrating how they can be applied in practical terms. As well, I think your ideas will be more credible if you use less dramatic language to describe the potential outcome of your vision of education. Although you have good ideas, you do need to organise them a bit more coherently; I have made some detailed suggestions on the paper itself about how you can improve the structure. This is a good start, and I look forward to seeing how you develop these ideas further as you go through the course. Your mark is a B minus.

Please let me know if you have any questions about the comments on your assignment, or about your mark,

Best regards, Evelyn

ON EDUCATION

The introduction of active occupations, of nature-study, of elementary science, of art, of history; the relegation of the merely symbolic and formal to a secondary position; the change in the moral school atmosphere, in the relation of pupils and teachers – of discipline; the introduction of more active, expressive, and self-directing factors – all these are not mere accidents, they are necessities of the larger social evolution[1]. It remains but to organize all these factors, to appreciate them in their fullness of meaning[2], and to put the ideas and ideals involved into complete, uncompromising possession of our school system. To do this means to make each school an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science[3]. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction[4], we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious.

1   This sentence encompasses a very broad concept of education, but it is a bit difficult to follow because you have packed so many ideas into it. It would be clearer if you broke it down into several smaller sentences, with each one addressing one main idea. You could then use these main ideas as themes you can develop throughout the essay.

2   This phrase is a bit cliché: how would you say this more simply?

3   You could expand on this concept of the school as a microcosm of society.

4   How would you do this while still covering the state curriculum?

Tutor two

John, it is simply not acceptable to present completely idealistic notions like this without any research evidence to support it and without any references to the current literature. If you expect to pass this course, (which is unlikely at this stage) you must at least develop adequate research skills and learn to present your evidence well supported by quantitative data.

D.

p.s. you have until next Tuesday to resubmit.

ON EDUCATION

The introduction of active occupations, of nature-study, of elementary science, of art, of history; the relegation of the merely symbolic and formal to a secondary position; the change in the moral school atmosphere, in the relation of pupils and teachers – of discipline; the introduction of more active, expressive, and self-directing factors – all these are not mere accidents, they are necessities of the larger social evolution[1]. It remains but to[2] organize all these factors, to appreciate them in their fullness of meaning[3], and to put the ideas and ideals involved into complete, uncompromising possession of our school system. To do this means to make each school an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout[4] with the spirit of art, history, and science[5]. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him[6] with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious.

1   This sentence is far too long and convoluted. You haven't made it clear what you really want to say. You must learn to be more succinct.

2   This is a very awkward construction.

3   What is this supposed to mean??

4   'throughout' is redundant.

5   This is a very idealistic notion of schooling, and you have provided no evidence whatsoever that this is achievable in practice.

6   You must learn to use inclusive language.

To what extent do the assessor's comments support learning?

What is most useful and least useful about the assessor's comments, and why?

How would you respond as a learner if your work were assessed in this way?

COMMENT

While the comments provided by the first tutor are fair, accessible, relevant and delivered in a positive manner, the second tutor does not exactly:

•   establish a positive attitude to the writer

•   recognise the strengths in the work

•   explain how to improve the sections of the work that need improvement

•   respond thoughtfully to the central concepts in the work.

As a learner you might feel very frustrated and undervalued by an assessment like this. Compare your thoughts with the description of a good learning experience that you developed in Unit 1.

TUTORS' MARKING STRATEGIES

The following are some comments from tutors about their marking strategies:

'When I mark, I , of course, try to make sure that the student has fulfilled the assignment and has done all the parts. I am more lenient when I mark Module 1 since it is the students' first assignment and it is conducive to a wide range of responses. For that module, I try and see if the student has been able to apply a number of the principles in the manual. I look for examples of this. I am stricter with the other modules but again look to see that the student has done all the parts of the assignment and has used what he/she has learned. For all of the modules, I consult the marking guide in the Tutor's Tool *as a base.'*

(Tutor of *Writing Effectively for UNHCR*)

'In working with students, it soon becomes obvious which ones have stronger writing skills and which ones have greater mastery of English. Without compromising my standards, I give the weaker students more room to err and try to determine when a resubmission will actually be educational and when the student has worked hard and done his/her best. Sometimes I allow a student to slide on one part but ask that he/she rework another if I feel that he/ she will benefit from concentrating on just that part. What I'm trying to say is that within my guidelines and minimum requirements, there is flexibility.'

(Tutor of *Writing Effectively for UNHCR*)

Here are some recommendations from an experienced tutor:

'List what should and should not be in a paper or assignment, to develop a checklist. Decide a marking scheme in advance.'

'Speak directly, informally and politely to your students. (Avoid red pen in favour of freshly sharpened, not-too-hard pencil). Imagine each student is your friend, or your neighbour or your peer. S/he may be thirty years older and twice as well educated as you are.'

'Always comment on the work, not its author. Always be upbeat, positive and constructive; single word comments are generally of little use, whether congratulatory or crushing; make 'because' one of your favourite words (explain what you mean, link comments together). It is a better fault to be too wordy than to be too brief in responding to distance students.'

'Tip: put numbers on the page of the assignment, then place the comments related to each number on a separate attached sheet.'

'In your summary comments, look back – try to consider the learner's previous work, and look forward – with some suggestions for the next assignment.'

'Use the assignment as the stimulus for a dialogue with the learner about content, future directions, applications of learning, possible improvements and always respond to learners' personal notes or messages.'

(Haag, 1990)

Activity 4.6 Practise marking assignments

In this activity, you will practise by marking sample assignments from an Effective Writing course that is offered to staff in an international organisation. The goal of the course is to enable learners to improve their written communication in the workplace. Although many of the course participants use English as an acquired language, the focus of this course is on effective writing rather than on ESL/EFL issues. Before marking the assignments, read the instructions to the students about the assignment.

Effective Writing Assignment One, Part A Instructions to students

Purposes of assignment. This assignment is designed to:

- assess your ability to write to a specific audience for a specific purpose
- give you an opportunity to analyse your writing skills.

Write about a page (and no more than 2 pages) to your tutor, outlining the strengths and weaknesses of your work-related writing. You should refer to the topics covered in the first module and give examples from your own writing to support the points you make. You should use the observations you have made about your writing in the module activities. You should demonstrate that you have considered your reader's needs and familiarity with the subject matter.

You will successfully complete Part A if, as a result of your assignment, your tutor is convinced that you have thought about and applied the main module teaching points to your analysis of your writing.

In keeping with the goals of the course to improve writing, the process of marking assignments is intended to enable participants to recognise their strengths and areas that need improvement, and then to improve them. For this reason, participants can revise their assignments and resubmit them, and are allowed a total of three opportunities to meet the assignment goals. Learners are not compared to each other because there is such a wide diversity of learners, needs and contexts. Learners fail the assignment only if they do not meet the assignment criteria on the third submission. Next, read the marking guide for tutors given below.

Marking guide for tutors

Assignment 1 Part A must show that the learner has analysed his or her own writing under the main topic headings of Module 1 (defining the communication objective; analysing audience; identifying barriers to effective communication); the learner does not have to address all the topics, but should demonstrate that she or he has thought about most of them. The writing must be in continuous prose, rather than point form. Learners should not be failed on language or syntax errors, but you, as a tutor, should identify errors to help the learner, without overwhelming the learner with correction marks. If there is a pattern of language errors, refer the learner to one of the English Language resources available to them.

Now read through these two sample assignments.

Anna's assignment

MODULE 1 ASSIGNMENT PART A

For the past four years, I have not had a work-related writing. I have just typed out the letters, faxes and memos dictated to me. Before those four years, I use to draft memos, letters, reports and other documents which my supervisors corrected before I finalise. Since then, my writing in English has been on occasional informal letters and emails to my friends. It is therefore difficult for me to truly assess my 'work-related' writing.

Through my work on Module 1 though, I discovered numerous weaknesses in my writing: the inappropriate use of pronouns, which I found in Activity 1.11, the confusion between count and mass nouns (in the same exercise), run-together sentences with sub-ideas and implications rather than facts. In constructing sentences, I would place the subordinate idea before the main one; when describing people, I would put the disability before the person. Moreover, I have been all the long using discriminatory terms on race and gender without realizing there were not appropriate. Other terms that I have been using are repetitious phrases such as first and foremost, midway between, past history and true facts. I would have put a coma after past history and an 'etc' after true facts if I had not enrolled for this course.

Another bad point in my writing is that I have always thought of myself while drafting: how I find my piece of writing, how I could alter it to please myself. I do not remember having put myself once in the reader's shoes!

I am most grateful to this course for having reminded me of my weaknesses and inefficiencies in writing in English.

Adriana's assignment

Effective Writing Assignment 1 part A

My strength and weakness of written English

My overall knowledge of English language is basic. My native language is Spanish. In the curriculum of the primary schools in my country, we start learning English as a second foreign language in the 5th grade. I've learned English three hours per week, to continue with the same intensity in the secondary school for four more years. During my working experience, English didn't have to do with my job. I must admit that most of the English I've learned by reading, music and movies.

I've joined the organisation in July 1999, as a secretary/receptionist. At the reception I was receiving visitors, responding to routine requests for information and referring people to appropriate agencies. Very often I was interpreting in different meetings, translating for my supervisors when meeting with local representatives, local NGOs, and individual cases. My daily work didn't require from me the written report; most of the times I was using verbal English.

After six months I've started working as a senior field clerk in community services sector. My everyday work includes participating in different meetings related to my work, making field visits, dealing with individual cases to assist and help them to have access to proper and timely assistance etc.

Later I became the coordinator for the regional educational women's program. It started as a multi-sectorial program to address the education needs of women of all ethnic groups throughout the region, and to work in the communities to encourage community training initiatives.

Having these responsibilities, I am required to do more writing; minutes of the meetings, note for the files, weekly reports etc. I know that my English writing ability doesn't meet the organisation's standards. One of the weakness that I have identified during my work, is that it takes me time to start writing something. It takes me time also to write a short letter, and is difficult for me to express my ideas in details as I would like to.

Compared to the weakness, the strong points of my English writing are fewer. If I can say, the area of strength is that I try to write easy and short sentences. This is perhaps I don't know too many English words, and I try to make the sentences simple. Although I have a short experience in this organisation, I am familiar with the organisation's writing style, and my writing often copies from it.

I am not satisfied with my current English writing. I have therefore applied to this writing course. I need to improve my English writing skills in order to write effective English in my work. My current work requires writing more and more, and it is important to write clear and substantial message or report.

I am very happy to participate in this course, although I am not familiar with the long distance self-study style. I hope that through working hard I will complete all exercises. I will try to understand and follow the techniques of the course and with the assistance of my tutor, I will achieve my desire to write in a proper language for my work.

Adriana

May 7/01

Mark the assignments in a way that addresses the purpose of the assignment and the marking guidelines. When you have finished marking, leave your marked assignment for a day or two, and then come back to it to review your marking.

COMMENT

When you come to review your marking of the assignments, you should try to assess the extent to which your marking:

- takes into account learners' expectations of tutors (identified after Activity 4.4)
- is consistent with the assignment instructions and the purpose of the assignment.

THE ESSENTIALS OF MARKING IN ODL

When marking assignments, you are directly engaged with the learner through the medium of print or electronic communication, and so your responses to assignments will need to be longer and more detailed than in face-to-face teaching, and framed as part of a dialogue with the learner, rather than a set of directions.

A self-management tip

You will need to keep track of when to expect assignments and to allocate time to mark them. Prepare, and keep handy, a calendar listing key dates during the course, including dates of tutorials, assignment submissions, deadlines for returning marked assignments and reporting marks.

Preparation

When you get your first assignment to assess, it may be difficult to know where to start. Use the assignment instructions to remind yourself what the assignment was intended to achieve, and what the assessment guidelines are. You may find it helpful to list the areas of

skills and knowledge that the assignment will assess and what you would expect in an assignment that was done well. This will help you to establish a frame of reference in your mind within which to assess the assignment. Some tutors like to read all the assignments through first, to get a general sense of how learners have handled the assignment, and then deal with individual assignments.

Considering the assignment

As you read the assignment, make rough notes, (not on the assignment script, but on a separate sheet of paper) to use when you prepare comments for the learner. Ask yourself:

- to what extent does the learner's work demonstrate each area of skills and knowledge that the assignment is assessing?
- what are the strengths and weaknesses, in terms of the criteria you have established for the assignment?
- how can you help the learner to build on the strong points?
- what suggestions do you have for helping the learner deal with the weaker areas?

Writing comments

Comments are your primary means of helping the learner and, like other interpersonal communications, should always begin on a positive note to encourage openness and dialogue. Sometimes, you may find it difficult to find something positive to say about the assignment, but the assignment has arrived and the learner has made the effort to get it there. So, you can always begin by thanking the learner for submitting the assignment. Then, give an overview of the assignment, followed by more detailed feedback that clearly, fairly, and systematically discusses how well each element meets the assessment criteria. Remember that your comments should encourage dialogue, rather than passing a final judgement. Compare these approaches:

'You've clearly thought about most of the factors that affect a distance learner's situation, but have you considered how isolation can affect a distance learner?'

and

'You've left out a key factor affecting open and distance learners; isolation, and as a result your analysis falls short.'

The first approach invites the learner to think about this factor and respond to your question, while the second one closes the door to further discussion.

Tutors may fall into the habit of just identifying the parts of an assignment needing correction, and assuming that the learners will know that everything else that they did was fine. This is a poor strategy, because learners need explicit confirmation of the parts of their assignment that were correct, and to have the strong points acknowledged and reinforced. Positive feedback gives learners an accurate idea of their strengths, so that they know what

they can build on. You also need to explain why the weak areas fall short of requirements, and suggest some strategies the learner can use to improve this area of their knowledge and skills. As Haag (1990) suggests:

'make "because" your favourite word, "a good introduction, because it presents…", "this is a good point, because…" or "your findings are not quite complete, because…"

If, in your context, learners are allowed to rewrite parts of their assignments, it's a good idea to provide guidance on what needs to be improved, how, and why. Here is how one tutor handles this situation:

'There was one student who seemed to have many ideas but did not know how to organise them coherently. At one point she prepared a draft and told herself, then told me, that she had done it with the thought that "Lynette would fix that." Well, Lynette did not fix it, we fixed it together. I never fix things on my own because it is not my work, and I believe students must have a sense of ownership.'

(Lynette Rodriguez, UWI)

Finish on a positive, hopeful and forward-looking note. Explain how the assignment relates to the next part of the course; recommend ways of building on what has been learned, or suggest resources that match a learner's interests.

For several reasons, many ODL institutions encourage tutors to write their comments on separate, specially formatted assignment marking pages. ODL assignment comments need to be comprehensive, and do not fit easily or legibly into the margins of an assignment. Many learners find it upsetting to see a lot of notes (particularly in red ink – often an unhappy reminder of school days) all over their carefully prepared work.

When marking an assignment on paper, relate your comments to sections of the assignment by numbering your comments and writing the corresponding number on the relevant part of the assignment. If you are marking assignments submitted electronically and they are in, or can be translated into, Microsoft Word, you can use the tracking tool that identifies your notes in a separate colour. You can add your notes to the assignment as either Footnotes or Comments, which will display in full when the learner clicks on them. You should, of course, make a copy of the assignment file before you begin to mark it, so that you have it available should any information be lost during the marking process.

Keeping records on assignments

Your institution will tell you the format and deadline for providing marks on assignments. In addition to this, you will need to maintain your own assignment records in your student files, including:

- a copy of your notes on the assignment
- information about any issues you want to follow up or keep in mind in future contacts with the learner
- a copy of the learner's assignment for future reference
- the mark on the assignment in case the learner appeals.

You should also keep a record of all learners' marks on each assignment, and notes on any general problems with the assignment that might indicate changes are needed to the course materials or the assignment.

ASSESSING DIFFERENT TYPES OF ASSIGNMENTS

Marking assignments in ODL is never simply putting a check mark and a few cryptic comments on the page. Earlier in this unit, you considered the range of assignment types which ODL marking has to accommodate. The table below suggests strategies for assessing skills and knowledge in different types of assignments.

Assignment types	Skills and knowledge	Marking strategies
Essays, reports, journals	Thinking critically and making judgements	Give feedback on each major topic and on presentation methods. Award marks for quality of analysis, clarity, coherence and completeness
Individual or group work on case studies, scenarios	Solving problems and developing plans	Give feedback on process and outcome. Award marks for coherence and completeness of analysis and solutions, presentation methods and evidence of effective group interaction
Discipline-specific problem solving (maths, science, engineering, medical fields)	Applying technical skills to problem solving	Give feedback on process, choice of methodology, application of methods, accuracy and clarity. Award marks on process and outcomes
Lab or workplace assessment, video demonstrations, on-site meetings	Performing procedures and demonstrating techniques	Give feedback on choice and application of methods. Award marks on process, outcomes, demonstrated skills and competencies
Learning contracts, learning journals, portfolios	Managing and developing oneself	Give feedback on completeness and coherence. Award marks on analysis, its application to practice and quality of presentation or portfolios
Developing a database or annotated bibliography, completing a task that requires assembling information or research data	Accessing and managing information	Give feedback on identifying task, planning and implementation. Award marks on consistency of analysis and application, completeness and coherence of research product
Projects, portfolios, video or audiotapes of performances	Designing, creating and performing	Give feedback on analysis, planning, design and implementation. Award marks on process, outcome, evidence of effective use of skills and quality of presentation
Reports, journals, essays, graphs, charts, visual images, live or taped video or audio debates, presentations, role-plays, computer conference discussions	Communicating	Give feedback on analysis, selection of communication methods and media, effectiveness of application of methods. Award marks on process, outcome, effective use of skills, appropriateness and effectiveness of application of methods/media

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS IN ODL ASSESSMENT

Some of the most common problems that occur in marking assignments in ODL are:

- failing an assignment while continuing to support the learner
- meeting learners' needs while meeting the educational institution's needs to maintain standards
- dealing with issues or problems with the course materials
- accommodating learning situations for which there is no clear policy, such as collaborative learning.

HOW TO FAIL AN ASSIGNMENT

This is difficult for both tutor and learner. You can fail an assignment if it does not meet the assessment criteria for a pass. Communicating this to the learner requires tact and familiarity with the ways the learner can redress the failure. It is important to begin by recognising the impact of a failing grade; for instance, 'This is disappointing news, I'm afraid.' Then give a general overview of the assignment's strengths, and explain why it did not pass. Finally, indicate what, specifically, the learner would need to do to achieve a pass. You should encourage learners to rewrite and resubmit, if they are allowed to. As one tutor says:

'Two things need to occur for each of us (tutor and learner) to make best use of failure: a renewal of determination to meet the challenge and a real understanding of what went wrong. So in returning failing work, you must give both encouragement and hope, and full explanation of the failure.'

(Haag, 1990)

If the learner has done well enough in other assignments to pass the course, point this out and help them to understand why this one assignment caused so much difficulty. If the learner has failed previous assignments, and/or is obviously struggling, use your diagnostic skills to determine if they need to develop skills and knowledge that are prerequisites for the course. If this is the case, suggest ways for the learner to acquire them, either while, or instead of, studying the current course. You will need to be familiar with the regulations governing changing courses and with the preliminary courses that are available. Above all, make it clear that the situation is redeemable, and that a failed assignment is not a reflection on the learner's worth as a person.

MAINTAINING ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Tutors' dual responsibilities for meeting the needs of learners and for maintaining the standards and academic integrity of the educational institution can lead to difficult choices, for example where plagiarism is suspected.

Plagiarism can mean that:

- a learner copied work from a published source without acknowledging the source

- a learner copied work from another learner

- two or more learners decided to work together on an assignment without advising the tutor.

The tutor must carefully assemble and consider the evidence, allowing for possible explanations other than deliberate plagiarism, and should not directly accuse a learner of plagiarism. A knowledgeable colleague may be able to help clarify the situation. Where plagiarism is an academic offence, there will be clear guidelines about how to approach the situation, and staff should not act alone or hastily.

In the first case, a learner may simply be unfamiliar with the conventions for acknowledging sources. You can advise the learner about the procedure, and save them and yourself a lot of trouble. If you have evidence of deliberate copying from a book, journal or website with intent to pass it off as the student's own work, then compare the learners' work with the suspected source, and ask a colleague or advisor for advice on the next step.

In the second case, where a learner may have copied another learner's work, point out the similarities in the assignments to both learners and, without accusation, ask them to explain. They may have a legitimate explanation, or just have not realised this was unacceptable. In some contexts, where presenting the 'right answer' is considered the primary goal in assessment, learners may feel it is all right to provide the right answer, even if it is someone else's answer. If you are not satisfied that the copying was simply a mistake, you should consult with a colleague or advisor about the next steps.

In the third case, where learners have worked together on an assignment, they may not have realised this was unacceptable. In many contexts, collaborative learning is encouraged. If learners have jointly prepared and submitted an assignment without asking you first if this is acceptable, you may be able to advise them that they will receive identical marks on the assignment, but they must consult with you before planning any future collaborative work. You will also need to know the institution's policy on collaborative work and advise learners of it.

DEALING WITH COURSE MATERIALS PROBLEMS

Sometimes course materials can cause learners some difficulties, through:

- inconsistency between the course materials and the assignments

- course materials that are outdated in a way that causes problems for learners

- unclear assignment instructions.

If you are the course author, then you can revise the course materials. If you know the course author, the best approach is to discuss the situation with them, and possibly offer to help

remedy the problem. If you do not know or cannot contact the course author, the right person to contact may be an instructor in the same department, or a department head. Assemble your information in writing, making it clear how the situation is affecting learners and including suggestions about possible solutions, if you have them, but allow room for the author or instructor to develop a solution.

DEALING WITH POLICY 'GREY AREAS'

Because ODL is developing quickly, moving into new areas and adopting new methodologies, you may encounter a situation for which there is no clear policy. For example, if the course author fails to consult administrators before including a collaborative learning project in a course, the course administrators may ask why a group of people have received identical marks for identical projects. You, the tutor, would first need to consult with the course author to develop a workable solution to the immediate problem that accommodates current policy. You would then need to work in concert with the course author and others to encourage a change in policy to accommodate collaborative learning on future presentations of the course.

The general principles for dealing with policy 'grey areas' are:

- deal with the immediate situation fairly, in consultation with colleagues or administrators
- suggest ways of addressing the issue over the longer term, through changes in policy and/or procedures
- follow up to make sure that learners know about any changes in policy or procedures that will affect their (and your) work.

Activity 4.7 Plan your assessment practice for a course

List the requirements of all the assessment activities in the course you are tutoring (or another course that you know), and explain how the purpose of each assignment meets the course objectives.

Develop assessment criteria for one assignment. Describe how you would assess the assignment by explaining how you would provide feedback on a very good assignment and on a very weak assignment.

COMMENT

Describing the requirements of the assignments in a course and considering how each of them relates to the course objectives will give you a clearer picture of what the assignments are intended to achieve. Developing assessment criteria and considering assessment strategies for one assignment will help you develop appropriate guidance and tutorial strategies for preparing learners for the assignment.

SUMMARY

Assessment is a core task of tutors in ODL, and requires judgement, sensitivity and clear-headedness. In assessing learners' work, we can either engage their interest and confidence in learning, or we can close the door and discourage them from continuing. No matter how independent or self-directed a learner may be, the tutor's response to their work has a crucial impact on their approach to learning, and their sense of their value as learners.

In Unit 4 we have explored how assessment in ODL meets the needs of learners, tutors, the educational institution and society, and considered the central role of tutors in guiding and managing assessment activities. We examined how different types of assignments can be used to assess different types of skills and knowledge, and provided an opportunity to practise planning an assignment. We considered the general principles of marking assignments, and how they can be applied to different types of assignments and ODL situations. The concluding section presented some strategies to deal with common problems and dilemmas that tutors face when assessing learners' work in ODL.

UNIT 5:
PLANNING AND FACILITATING GROUP LEARNING

'A study group gives you more insight and enables you to participate. What you have discussed in a group once, you will never forget.'

'We build confidence in each other: even introverts become extroverts because each one is given a chance to say something. Each one chooses the chapter she wishes to prepare for the next study group meeting, especially a chapter she wishes to understand better.'

(Learners quoted by Chadibe, 2002)

In Unit 5, we will explore the tutor's role in fostering group interaction among learners. We will look at how enabling learners to engage in group learning activities can help them to become more effective, reflective and self-directed. Many of the principles of group dynamics and interpersonal communications from other educational settings also apply to planning and guiding interaction in ODL.

OBJECTIVES

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the rationale behind the use of group learning in ODL

- apply the principles of group learning

- devise strategies to foster effective group learning, whether face-to-face or at a distance

- plan and implement group learning activities for ODL courses

- select and use technologies for group learning.

THE RATIONALE AND PRINCIPLES OF GROUP LEARNING IN ODL

In ODL, group learning opportunities are provided through tutorials, discussion sessions and collaborative tasks or projects, which may be offered face-to-face or through audio, video or computer conferencing. ODL learners are extremely busy people with many demands on their lives, so how do they benefit from group learning?

THE RATIONALE FOR GROUP LEARNING

The short answer is that, while some academic cultures have regarded learning as the individual acquisition of knowledge, it is as much a social as an individual activity. Many experts in academic learning now agree that learning is a social process that takes place in a community as well as in the learner's mind. As one educator puts it:

'Knowledge is constantly created and transformed at the intersection of dialogue between people, their collective knowledge and experience, in particular settings and context.'

(Leach, 1996)

Some people complete ODL courses having had little interaction with fellow learners but, depending on learning style, course content and context, many find it unsatisfactory to learn this way. Learners on a management course will benefit from group work on some essential management skills, such as planning and communication and, while a solitary learner may be able to solve problems in a mathematics course, discussing the process with another learner can strengthen analysis and problem-solving skills. Many learners learn by doing, and must engage in dialogue in order to develop knowledge and skills. In a group, ideas can be articulated, tested, clarified and applied in a tangible way. As one well-quoted learner comments:

'How do I know what I'm thinking until I hear what I have to say?'

Working in groups helps develop learning skills for:

- planning tasks
- developing clear communications strategies
- analysing and solving problems
- resolving potential conflicts
- working collaboratively towards a common goal.

Learning with others enables people to articulate and shape ideas, and to:

'summarise, explain, and elaborate on information, which helps encode into long-term memory, seek feedback, strengthen what is known;

develop creative and divergent thinking styles as they adjust to different styles of thinking and expression;

temporarily suspend the expression of their own opinions while listening to other points of view;

monitor and regulate each other's thinking as it is held up for critical review and exploration;

give and get process feedback;

use peer expectations to increase their motivation to prepare for sessions.'

(Burge and Roberts, 1998, from Johnson, 1992)

Group learning also:

- helps learners acquire learning skills

- provides the motivation of social contact

- integrates learning with practice, especially in work-related learning and professional development

- helps with information exchange, questions about the course and approaches to study.

Activity 5.1 The aims of group learning activities

Think about how group learning activities are used in your context.

What should group learning activities achieve in the course you are tutoring?

What kinds of group learning activities would be appropriate for your course?

COMMENT

As well as aims specific to your course or context, you may have included some general aims for group learning activities, such as to:

- provide motivation by fostering communication among learners and reducing the sense of isolation

- develop and enhance learning skills

- provide opportunities to consolidate and apply learning to work situations or professional practice.

Activities for a group session could include:

- discussion, debate, group projects, learner presentations, case studies

- learning activities that are not feasible in the learners' home context, such as laboratory experiments, field studies, use of a library, use of specialised media.

THE PRINCIPLES OF GROUP LEARNING

When planning and facilitating group learning activities in different types of learning situations, the principles discussed in Unit 3 for enabling learners to develop skills and integrate their knowledge are still relevant, including:

- enabling learners to make choices in their learning

- creating a supportive learning environment

- encouraging problem-based learning

- encouraging reflection on the process and content of learning

- fostering the application of knowledge through learning activities and group work

- providing for learner choices in assessment tasks

- designing assessment that engages problem solving rather than memorisation.

(Derived from Gibbs, 1992)

Assembling a group of learners does not ensure that group learning takes place. We can distinguish between different approaches to group activities as follows:

Instructor-directed	Group-centred	Collaborative
Motivate participation	Build on experience	Involve in problem solving
Provide for interaction	Strengthen relationships	Share responsibilities
Recognise contributions	Raise questions	Compare alternatives
Define terms	Explore hypotheses	Test hypotheses
Clarify content	Formulate ideas	Base action on criteria
Identify assumptions	Examine assumptions	Modify assumptions

(Developed by McBeath, quoted in Burge and Roberts, 1998)

Learners and educators accustomed to a transmission model of learning may take time to change their expectations from an instructor-directed approach to a group-centred or a collaborative approach. One educator, after quoting a tutor who said learners will 'run away' if a tutorial contains group work, comments:

'Learners need the developmental experience of acquiring skills and confidence to move away from rote learning or "being lectured to". Tutors need support in providing this developmental process for their learners. Independent learning is the goal, but tutors have to begin by acknowledging "where the learners are" and gradually assisting them to become more and more in control of their learning.'

(Chadibe, 2002)

As a tutor, you may need to deal with learners' expectations that you will provide direct instruction, by clarifying what you will do to support learning and reassuring them that they can learn in more effective and enjoyable ways through group activities, rather than by listening to a lecture. You can meet this commitment through effective planning and provision of group learning opportunities. The first step in planning is considering the context for group learning.

Activity 5.2 The context for group learning

What options for group learning are available in your institution?

Which is most suitable to your course?

Why is this the best choice?

What considerations will affect using this option for group learning?

COMMENT

Possible options include local on-site tutorials; audio- or videoconference tutorials; computer conferencing; learner-managed study groups, or extended face-to-face meetings, such as weekend workshops. The best choice will be affected by the nature of the course, the learners' situation and other practical issues. The ability to use a particular option will be affected by considerations of cost, scheduling, travel and access to technology. These affect planning for group learning because, for example, travel or cost issues may mean that it is better to provide longer, less frequent sessions, rather than short weekly or biweekly meetings.

PLANNING FOR GROUP LEARNING

In ODL, the options for group learning are often determined by the administrators of the educational institution, based on budget, available technologies and established practice. If an institution decides to use audio conferences for group interaction in its ODL courses, and invests in the technical and site arrangements necessary, it is unlikely to support different methods for a particular course. Your planning must make the best use of available options. Fortunately, common principles for planning and facilitating group learning in ODL apply despite the differences in arrangements, and learners respond to well-planned group learning:

' I really enjoyed the study group format that we are using…. In addition to the reading, which I found particularly interesting, I spent much time thinking about our study group target issue. I felt that by concentrating on one issue, I could really explore the issue in depth and brainstorm with my team-mates on the issue'

(Maryland/Oldenburg student)

The basic principles of planning for group learning in ODL apply whether you are meeting your group in person or through a communication technology. In this unit, we use the terms group learning activity and group learning session. By group learning activity, we mean a group activity that has one focus or purpose, whether it takes place in one meeting, or over an extended period of time. By group learning session, we mean a meeting of a group of learners (whether in person or at a distance) that may include several activities. Whether you are planning a group learning activity or group learning session, your plan should:

- have a clear purpose
- establish tasks that suit that purpose
- provide guidelines to learners for group management and group behaviour

- provide opportunities for self-direction appropriate to the learners' task, level of study and experience
- be designed so that the tutor can respond to the situation as it evolves, while keeping the ultimate goal in mind, rather than trying to steer group interaction in a direction it doesn't want to go
- make the best use of the technology or meeting arrangement.

If participation in group learning is required, then tutors can plan group activities that are an integral part of the course, and that count towards the final grade. These group activities might extend over several sessions, providing pacing and complementing the goals of the relevant stage in the course.

In courses with optional participation, learning activities are supplementary to the course and should be designed to suit learners who will not necessarily take part all the time, and be flexible enough to respond to the specific interests and goals of learners who do attend. Optional group learning can offer remedial help for motivated learners, enable learners to develop self-directed learner support groups, or provide special sessions designed to meet specific needs, such as preparing for exams.

Activity 5.3 Learners' expectations of group learning

Imagine you are a participant in a distance course on tutoring in ODL, and are about to meet your fellow learners in a group learning session.

What would you hope to be able to accomplish in this meeting?

What would you expect the course tutor to do?

COMMENT

Most ODL learners expect group sessions to be immediately relevant to their progress in the course. They expect to:

- obtain answers to questions about the course from the tutor
- find out how to be successful in assignments and the exam
- obtain supplementary information on the course from the tutor.

Although group meetings can accommodate these expectations, the main focus and benefit of these sessions should be to enable group learning. As a knowledgeable learner, you may have listed the opportunity to:

- work with others on a learning task directly relevant to your work as a tutor
- share knowledge and experience through working on a project together
- develop and consolidate learning by application to a project or group problem solving

- define and negotiate your group learning activity with other learners and your tutor
- learn more about tutoring practice from observing how the tutor guided the session
- establish contact with other tutors, so that you can share ideas and support each other in your work.

Planning group learning has to consider the learners' significant role in contributing their energy, interest, areas of expertise and willingness to learn. The stages of the plan must include steps to:

- pave the way for learning
- include group learning activities designed to complement course goals and meet learner needs
- provide responsive facilitation strategies to enable learners to achieve their goals
- facilitate the evaluation of a group learning activity or session.

The tables below show how you can resolve the stages of the process into steps to be taken and questions that will inform the actions to be taken in making those steps.

Planning stage	Steps	Ask yourself
Paving the way	Consider the learners' needs for specific knowledge, skills, encouragement and confidence building.	How can I encourage learners to engage with the group? Which warm-up activities would suit this group?
	Identify how the session or activity relates to the course materials and issues that may arise from the course materials.	What questions or concerns might learners have about the part of the course they are now studying?
Designing activities	Define session or activity aims, taking into account learner needs at this stage of the course.	How to answer the learner's question: 'Why will my learning benefit from this session?'
	Establish specific session objectives.	What will this session enable learners to know or do?
	Determine what activities will best meet these objectives, emphasising learner-directed over tutor-led activities.	What is the best way to achieve these objectives? What kind of activity suits this situation?

Planning stage	Steps	Ask yourself
Planning facilitation strategies	Decide on appropriate strategies to encourage learners to communicate with each other and engage in activities.	What are effective incentives for these learners: • engaging in group discussion and tasks • improved learning • higher marks • opportunities to apply learning?
	Develop contingency strategies to use if an activity does not work as expected.	How will I know if an activity isn't working as expected? Do I intervene, let learners sort it out, or try another activity?
Planning evaluation	Decide how to assess the effectiveness of the group learning process and outcomes.	How will I know if this session has worked well or achieved its goals?

PAVING THE WAY FOR LEARNING

Your plans should include a welcome to the learners, some initial warm-up activities, and a means of confirming that everyone understands the purpose of the group learning situation. Learners can get to know each other and overcome any uncertainties or lack of confidence by engaging with others in a non-threatening 'warm-up' activity. Later on, you may want to plan activities that help groups develop their collaboration skills, especially if they will be taking on more complex group tasks.

Brief, two-sentence, introductions are a simple but effective way of welcoming learners and helping them to connect with others. Suggest a short list of topics for learners to cover in their introductions, such as their name, location, work or professional interests and goals for the course. When you welcome learners, you can explain the purposes of the group learning session: when you introduce yourself, you can model how learners can present their introduction.

Warm-up activities are not frivolous; they contribute to learning, by enabling learners to get to know each other in a relaxed way and to use communications skills, such as listening, interviewing and summarising. Activities should be enjoyable, unintimidating, allow equal participation and help people to learn a bit about each other without invading anyone's privacy. Here are some ideas for small-group warm-up activities:

Type	Name	Description
Pair introductions	Mutual introductions	Participants are in pairs, and each person describes something about themselves in one or two sentences. The group reassembles and each participant introduces their partner to the group, based on what their partner has told them.
Small-group activities	Cumulative memory	Each person describes one thing about themselves, e.g. what they would want to get from the course, what they would like to get from the tutorial session or why they are interested in the course. After everyone has done this, each tries to summarise what all the other group members have said about themselves.
	Characteristics	Each person in a group of about ten people has a piece of paper instructing them to find someone in the group with a particular characteristic, such as having three children, working for the Ministry of Education or being a musician. The tutor prepares the instructions based on what he or she knows about group members. When everyone in the group has identified the person they are looking for, the group has completed its task.
Group development activities	Puzzle patterns	This activity demonstrates the difficulty of working together at a distance. Divide the group into two teams. One team makes a pattern from children's plastic blocks, keeping it hidden from the other. The builders of the pattern then describe to the other team how to replicate it, communicating verbally without gestures or other clues.
	Telephone	Give one person in the group a written message. They then tell the message quietly to the next person, so that the group cannot hear. The message is relayed from person to person around the group until it returns to the original person, who then writes down the message they receive and compares it with the original. Groups usually have a good laugh over how much the message has changed, but it also helps to analyse how it changed and how each person's assumptions affected it. The exercise shows how easily messages can be misinterpreted and how important it is to check one's assumptions.

DESIGNING GROUP LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Activities that enable group learning in ODL are comparable to group learning activities in other contexts, and your repertoire of group learning activities will be a helpful resource. You will need to decide how much direction and structure you will provide for learners, whether you will:

- plan a complete programme of group activities for the duration of the course
- prepare a few activities at first and then enable learners to direct their own group work
- provide learners with guidelines for planning their own group activities and let them carry out their own plans.

'It is the perceived task that makes sense of everything else, and if there is no clear task, people will have no basis upon which to decide what they are supposed to do or how they are to engage with each other... A corollary point is that people will also prefer to carry out the actions and operations required to meet their perceived objective in the way that is either most familiar to them or is most easy to achieve.'

(Crook, 2000)

The amount of structure and guidance you provide for group learning activities will depend on the goals of the course, the context, the learners' group skills and the resources available to them. A group of graduate students who can communicate readily in person, by phone or email, and have access to library and other resources, should be in a good position to manage their own group learning. In contrast, a group of first-time ODL learners will need clear information about the goal and nature of the task and guidance on group process.

Choosing activity types

The following chart lists different types of group learning activities, how they operate, and the skills that they can help develop. You can use this to help you consider options for your course.

Activity	Allows	Uses these skills
Small-group discussions	Each group to focus on specific interests, and then share with main group so everyone can learn	Communication, task analysis, leadership.
Debates	Development of two sides of an issue, clarification of positions	Critical thinking, analysis, verbal communications, leadership
Demonstration and practice	Application of skills in a real or simulated setting	Interpersonal skills (counselling), manual skills, applied skills (lab work)
Situational analysis	Identification of push-pull factors, strengths and weaknesses in a situation	Analysis, critical thinking, leadership, communications
Case studies	Applying skills to consideration of a complex situation	Analysis, application, synthesis, communications, organising tasks, leadership, problem solving
Learner presentations	Individuals or groups of learners to develop their ideas in a clearly understood way	Analysis, communications
Role-plays	Application of interpersonal, problem-solving and communications skills in a practice situation	Analysis, organising tasks, leadership, problem-solving, communication

Considerations for planning activities

When considering the learning value of an activity, ask yourself the following questions.

- How will learners benefit from this activity?
- What skills will they develop?
- How will this contribute to learning that is relevant to the course?
- How well does it suit the content and level of the course, and the particular point in the course (beginning, middle or end)?
- Does it provide an opportunity to strengthen other intellectual skills, such as developing and presenting ideas, preparing and assessing an argument, clarifying ideas, learning from others' experience, negotiating a process?
- How does this activity complement other group activities in this session or course? Does it build on the other activities, or provide contrast or a change of pace?

When you have drafted your proposed activities, you can ask a further question.

- How do all the activities fit together to achieve the overall objective of the session?

Practical factors to consider when designing activities are the:

- time available for group learning
- number of participants
- resources available to participants.

PLANNING RESPONSIVE FACILITATION STRATEGIES

When planning group learning, you also need to plan your facilitating role as tutor:

- explaining the purposes and process of group learning tasks
- coaching learners by helping them develop skills or find resources they need for their group learning activity
- monitoring progress of group learning
- providing ongoing feedback to each group
- enabling groups to solve problems that might arise.

Things do not always go as expected, and you will need contingency plans to cover the possibility that:

- learners do not 'take to' a planned activity because they do not see the point of it, are unprepared for it or misinterpret the instructions
- a discussion gets off track so that it is no longer directed towards the original goal
- a group activity has promising discussions but is not completed in the allocated time.

Your contingency plans may include alternative activities or ideas for intervening if a discussion runs aground, and your planned strategies should enable learners to contribute ideas so that they are part of the solution.

PLANNING THE EVALUATION OF A GROUP LEARNING ACTIVITY OR SESSION

Formative evaluation involves assessing the effectiveness of the activity in process and making changes to make it more effective. In addition to this, you should specify how you will assess the session or activity after it ends. To determine how well the process worked in achieving its intended goals, your evaluation might:

- ask learners their opinion (informally or formally, in questionnaires or interviews)
- observe how the activity helps learners with their learning by monitoring how well they continue to use and apply what they have learned
- ask an outside observer, such as a colleague or employer, to comment on the impact of the session or activity.

The time and effort spent on evaluation should be in proportion to the time involved in the activity. Don't spend two days evaluating a one-hour activity. Here is a sample evaluation form:

GROUP LEARNING SESSION EVALUATION FORM

This evaluation will help us assess the activities and resource materials for this session: please complete it before you leave. Thank you – your input is valuable.

1. List your goals for the session:

2. Do you feel you achieved your goals? Circle the number that best matches your assessment.

    Not at all   *Completely*

    0   1   2   3   4   5

Your comments:

3. Did the activities help you to achieve your goals?

    Not at all   *Completely*

    0   1   2   3   4   5

Your comments:

4. Did the discussions with other participants help you to achieve your goals?

    Not at all   *Completely*

    0   1   2   3   4   5

Your comments:

5. Did the resource materials help you to achieve your goals?

    Not at all   *Completely*

    0   1   2   3   4   5

Your comments:

6. Did the technology used help you to achieve your goals?

    Not at all   *Completely*

    0   1   2   3   4   5

Your comments:

Activity 5.4 Planning a group learning activity or session

Plan a group learning activity or session for your course. You should:

• make it clear whether learner participation is optional or required

• include a brief profile of the course and the learners, and context

• give the purpose, expected outcomes and duration of the group learning session or activity

• explain how the session or activity will benefit learners – what skills it will develop, what opportunities it will provide, etc.

• outline your role in facilitating the group learning session or activity

• describe your contingency plans

• detail how you will evaluate the session or activity.

COMMENT

Your plan should:

• have clear objectives

• include a learning plan that fits the objectives

• be manageable, given the time available, resources, learner profile

• have an appropriate time allocation

• include practical contingency plans

• have an appropriate and feasible evaluation plan.

FACILITATING GROUP LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND SESSIONS

When you know what you want the activity or session to accomplish, what you will do and what the learners will do, you have a framework for facilitating a group learning activity or session for your course. In Unit 3 we explored how tutors facilitate individual learning by using their communication, motivation and problem-solving skills to enable learners to develop their own learning paths and overcome obstacles to their learning. These skills

are equally important for group learning. Irrespective of the methods or technologies used to bring a group together, facilitation strategies for group learning should:

• make learners feel welcome and comfortable

• encourage communication and cooperation among learners

• enable learners to participate in interesting, challenging and rewarding learning tasks

• ensure everyone has an opportunity to have their questions answered.

MAKING LEARNERS FEEL WELCOME AND COMFORTABLE

You may be nervous as the host of the group learning meeting, but learners may be more nervous, so your encouragement will help everyone overcome their anxiety. Allow enough time for introductions – including yours! Providing an overview of the session, its goals and the main activities, will relieve anxiety. Let learners know that they will have an opportunity to ask questions about the course during the session and make sure you leave time for questions and answers.

ENCOURAGING COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION AMONG LEARNERS

The warm-up activities should establish a basic level of communication among participants. Before learners begin group activities, it's helpful to discuss the ground rules of interaction, which should:

- ensure that all learners and their views are respected
- ensure everyone is responsible for helping groups to function well and enable full participation
- establish that discussions should allow for a range of views to be expressed, and any disagreements should deal with ideas, not personalities.

You may want to develop these ground rules in consultation with the group, or present your suggested ground rules and ask for their comments and additions.

You may need to provide some guidance about how groups can organise themselves for an activity. Groups need to decide how they will:

- work as a group
- ensure everyone has input
- record their activity.

Some groups like to appoint a leader or someone to keep notes, while others decide to deal with the task as a whole or allocate tasks to individuals or pairs. If groups are obviously having difficulties getting organised, suggest a strategy that will help get them started.

ENABLING LEARNERS TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERESTING, CHALLENGING AND REWARDING LEARNING TASKS

As Crook noted:

'it is the perceived task that makes sense of everything else.'

At the outset, explain the purpose and nature of the session or activity, how it relates to the course content or topic, what learners should get out of it and how they should proceed. Make sure learners feel free to ask questions at the beginning of the session and if they run into difficulties while working on it.

Group activities are more satisfying if everyone has a chance to contribute creativity and expertise, each person's contribution is acknowledged;and no one dominates the discussion. Learners need time to become accustomed to managing their own learning in groups but, while it is tempting to manage the process for them, allowing learners to develop their own strategies will enhance their learning and communication skills. You can help by answering questions or offering suggestions if a group reaches an impasse.

Groups will be disappointed if they cannot share their work with others or get feedback from you. They should have opportunities to inform each other about their work through oral reports or prepared notes. These, your comments and feedback will confirm the value of the activity and recognition of a group's accomplishment. One strategy is for each group to report back to all groups as a whole, but this may not be feasible or may be repetitious. To help ensure that every group's work is acknowledged and receives a response, you could:

- designate one group to report back, and ask other groups to comment on any differences in their findings or results
- ask each group to report on one aspect of their activity
- ask groups to highlight only the issues that arose during the discussion.

ENSURING EVERYONE HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS

Many learners expect to get answers to questions about activities, course content or assignments in group learning sessions. It's important to ensure there is an opportunity to ask questions, but you don't need to provide all the answers, as learners will benefit from answering questions and sharing their knowledge.

Activity 5.5 Review your learning plan

Review your group learning plan in the light of the strategies for facilitating group learning which we have covered and describe any changes you would make, especially to your role in facilitation.

COMMENT

After you have reviewed and modified your plan, you may find it beneficial to explain the reasons for changes in a group discussion.

GROUP LEARNING CONTEXTS

In this section, we will explore how to apply the rationale, principles and basic strategies for planning and facilitating ODL group learning in different group learning situations, such as tutorial sessions, extended on-site sessions, and audio-, video- or computer conference sessions. You may want to focus on the situations relevant to you, reviewing the rest for your own information. For each situation, we will provide planning and facilitation tips.

ON-SITE TUTORIAL SESSIONS

Regular tutorials are usually offered for the duration of the course, either near to the learner or in a central location. Tutorial sessions have a set duration (usually from one to three hours), a fixed frequency (weekly, fortnightly or monthly), a specific time, and need to be carefully planned to facilitate interaction. Poorly planned tutorials can become lectures rather than group learning opportunities. On-site tutorials offer direct personal contact among learners and with the tutor, and may provide opportunities for practical work, such as laboratory experiments, nursing or teaching demonstrations.

Planning tips

When planning a tutorial, find out about the tutorial location and resources in advance. Check if there are:

- moveable chairs (making it easier for people to assemble in groups)
- reliable electrical power supplies and convenient outlets
- chalkboards, flip charts or overhead projectors for presenting information
- phone lines or high-speed computer lines for conferencing or computer use.

Depending on the size of the group and type of activities, consider whether:

- to prepare tutorial resources in advance
- all students need a copy of worksheets or discussion guides
- one set of materials per group, overheads or flip chart pages are sufficient.

After one or two sessions, you will be able to factor in the learners' preferences for certain types of activities, or desire to try a different activity. Plan time for settling in, questions and answers, and a summary. A two-hour tutorial might have a short activity followed by a longer activity involving focused group work and a short final activity to allow exchange of ideas among the group.

Facilitation tips

Tutorials differ from conventional instruction in that they do not present content, but are designed to enable learners to develop learning skills, to work with the content and to clarify questions. ODL tutorials should focus on learner activity, not tutors talking.

EXTENDED ON-SITE SESSIONS

ODL courses may include extended on-site sessions that provide greater opportunities for groups to:

- develop teamwork
- use group learning strategies to accomplish tasks
- apply learning in practical settings

- develop specialised skills
- consult informally with course instructors or tutors.

At the beginning of a graduate or professional ODL course, extended sessions can establish group communication and team tasks that will continue through the course, while at the end of the course they allow for presentation of group projects and summarising course achievements.

Planning tips

In addition to the tips given for tutorial sessions, planning for extended on-site sessions should:

- enable groups to make the best use of the extended time-frame to complete a significant piece of work
- enable learners to take time out from intensive work by engaging in less demanding activities, as most people can concentrate on an intellectual task for about 90 minutes
- ensure opportunities for physical exercise and social activities are available to provide a break
- begin and end with a plenary meeting, so that the group as a whole can establish their footing and share their common experiences. Interim plenary sessions will enable groups to share progress, ask questions and raise issues.

Facilitation tips

Set up a context where groups can work together well, by:

- providing clear information, sharing goals and expectations for the session
- enabling learners to get to know one another
- providing opportunities for learners to have some input into the plans for the session.

Your facilitation will be directed towards encouraging learners to take responsibility for ensuring groups operate in an inclusive and effective way, responding to groups if they have questions or are unclear about how to proceed or solve a problem.

AUDIO CONFERENCE SESSIONS

In audio conferencing, telephones or narrow-band radios provide communication between learners at different sites. Participants use speakerphones or specially designed microphones, which are connected to a central bridge. The tutor may be at one of the sites, or at the bridge location. Ideally, each site receives any printed resources in advance of the session, although some audio conference systems allow for the display of print or graphics. At the start of the session, either the bridge operator or the tutor will ask participants at each site to confirm they are there and can hear everyone else clearly. Sometimes, one person at each site is designated as a coordinator to handle logistical tasks, but the conference session

should be designed to enable as many people as possible at each site to participate. Take part in an audioconference session before starting to plan audio conference tutorials, so you understand what is feasible. Observe and note strategies and activities that engage learners and stimulate effective discussion, and factors that impede communication. You can also listen to tapes of audio conferences to get a sense of what the experience is like for the learners at distant sites. This information will help you to plan activities that make the best use of the medium. You should get sufficient technical training to use the system and to do basic trouble-shooting, and obtain as much information as you can about the audio conference system you will be using; its capabilities and limitations and what to do in case of technical difficulties.

Learners will also need training in using the technology. Ideally, there should be training resources for learners; if not, you should ask the technical support person to help you develop a short briefing package for learners about using the conferencing system.

The advantages of audio conferencing are that it enables learners:

- in different locations to take part in course activities without travelling great distances

- to communicate and exchange ideas,

- to complete tasks together

- to build a sense of group cohesion across a distance.

The disadvantages are that learners:

- cannot see each other or the tutor

- or the tutor may find the technology intimidating

- may feel that it is hard to 'break in' to the discussion when they have something to say.

Planning tips

Many of the same principles apply to planning an audio conference session as for face-to-face group learning. As well as building contact, warm-up activities give learners an opportunity to try out the technology and become more comfortable with it. You will need to develop more guidance for group learning activities by providing written advance information to learners about the session plan, and any resources they need for the session, so that they can consult this information during the session, and continue with some of the planned activities even if there are technical problems. Planning for audio conferences should:

- avoid situations in which one person will be speaking for a long time (i.e., 5 minutes or more) because it is hard to maintain concentration when listening to just one voice

- remember that audioconferencing is not a good medium for lectures, but is good for interviews with guest experts, discussions, and interactions among participants

- involve activities that engage learners and help them establish cooperative connections with the learners at other sites that they cannot see

- consider (if the group is large, and technology permits) dividing an audio conference network into groups of two or three sites for smaller activities, and reconvening for a plenary discussion.

Facilitation tips

As you will be working with unseen learners connected by an audio link, you will need to invest more time and effort in building and maintaining a sense of connection and communication, with and between learners at different sites. Before the first session, contact each site to make sure that the site is properly set up, that the doors are unlocked and that there are signs indicating where participants should go. Make sure that your technical person knows how to follow up with any sites that do not respond to the initial roll-call.

When facilitating a group audio conference, remember that:

- as each site signs in, responding to each site with a short individualised message builds rapport

- in the first session, introductions naturally follow the roll-call process. If the group is large, one person can introduce each site, or written introductions can be copied to all sites

- asking learners to identify themselves and their site when they make a comment will help people connect names, voices and locations, and build a sense of connection

- speaking to a microphone may seem awkward, so speak clearly but naturally, keep your voice level and strong, without shouting, and pause frequently to allow questions

- a prepared script will seem stilted, so work from notes

- at first, you and the local contacts will need to help people become comfortable with the technology

- the time delay in transmission can cause awkward pauses until participants get used to it

- learner anxiety can be reduced if you allocate time for learners to ask questions or make comments, and encourage learners to submit their questions in writing before the session, to be answered 'on air'

- in later sessions, people may offer a short comment along with their 'hello, we're here' message, showing that participants recognise the need to exchange social news as well as getting down to the learning tasks

- your session overview should check that the materials have arrived – refer to them and allow for questions

- participants are just people like you might meet in the classroom, but further away

- if there are more than fifteen people at each site, have two or three small groups rather than one large group. This provides for some variety of tasks and for discussions with different people at the same site, rather than always grouping the same people together

- in the plenary session, each group should have an opportunity to discuss their work and receive comments and feedback

- a question addressed to everyone can result in a response from no one despite your best efforts to phrase questions so that they elicit responses. If you use the checklist method to track each site's participation, you can address comments and questions to different sites in turn. If you do this, you should mention the site at the end of the question, not at the beginning, so that everyone is listening, and no one tunes out thinking, 'It's not for me.'

- you can help develop a sense of connection among groups if you encourage each site to summarise in writing the outcomes of their group activities and forward them to you for distribution or, if feasible, to forward them directly to the other sites, so that each site has a written record of their colleagues' activities

- an excellent reference on audio conferencing is McDonald, D. (1998) *Audio and Audiographic Learning: The Cornerstone of the Information Highway* Montreal:Cheneliere/McGraw Hill.

VIDEOCONFERENCING

Videoconferencing provides audiovisual communication among groups of learners at different sites, via phone lines or satellites – or both. Desktop videoconferencing uses computers to bring the signal to an individual or a small group. Each site connects to a central access point, which then transmits their video signal to the other locations, and participants can enter into the discussion by speaking into a microphone, push-to-talk speakerphones or combined camera and microphone. Sometimes one site can 'lock out' other sites, so that only the transmitting site can be received by others. The video image is usually 'slow scan' which means that it transmits a series of still images rather than full motion video. There are usually provisions to transmit computer graphics on the system.

The advantages of videoconferencing are that it allows learners:
- in different locations to communicate and work together
- and the tutor to see each other
- to present and share information with a visual component, such as biology slides, artwork or design concepts in architecture or engineering
- to take part in debate, role-playing and simulations, to present the process and/or results of their group work to participants at other locations.

The disadvantages are that:
- learners can only see one other site at a time, so some sites may be invisible for periods of time, unless there are only two sites
- slow-scan video may take some time to load and transmit, and will not be synchronised with the voice of the speaker

- the technology can be intimidating and sometimes fragile
- skilled technical support is usually required, in addition to a local site coordinator to handle logistics.

As in an audio conference, you will have to rely on someone at each site to ensure the facilities are set up for the session. The cameras at each site may be controlled by the participants or by a technical person. If participants are directing the camera locations, they will need guidance about lighting, camera location, focusing, and zooming in and out, and to get used to sound-activated cameras. Learners should have a practice session or a briefing package that gives them basic information about working with the system.

Planning tips

The principles for planning for videoconferencing are similar to those for planning audio conference sessions, but it is important to experience videoconferencing before planning a videoconference session, and to have adequate technical training in using the system. The level of visual communication is not be the same as 'being there', and you will need to become familiar with the types of visual images that can be transmitted effectively via the system. When planning a videoconference session, remember that:

- graphics, slides, diagrams and print summaries need to be formatted in a particular way in order to be picked up by a videoconference camera
- you must provide advance information to learners about the session plan and any resources they will need, so they can prepare for the session
- planning for videoconferencing should make the most of visual communication, rather than presenting 'talking heads'
- warm-up activities should be designed to allow learners to use the technology for a specific purpose, such as reporting on their activity
- it will take you and learners a bit more time to become used to the technology
- videoconferencing technology can be more fragile than audio conferencing technology.

Facilitation tips

You and learners will need to get used to seeing your own image on the monitor. Speaking to a camera may seem awkward, but you shouldn't need to do too much of it. The first session should allow for individual or group introductions, depending on the size of the groups and the time available, which are a good opportunity for each site to try out the technology and to get used to being on camera. When facilitating a videoconference session:

- avoid monologues
- encourage learners to respond as much as possible
- encourage group learning at each site by inviting large groups of learners at one site to work in smaller groups on specific activities

- allow groups to use a wider range of presentation techniques when discussing and presenting their activities, if the system enables the use of visual elements or computer graphics
- keep the focus on the learning goals and activities, rather than the technology
- ensure that each site has equal opportunities to ask questions and to participate in a plenary discussion.

COMPUTER CONFERENCING

In computer conferencing, communication happens via email or specialised software. We think of computer communication as instant because messages appear to leave our computer when we click on 'send'. It is not – there is a delay, which makes the system asynchronous, that is, messages are sent and received at different times. Most people are very familiar with one form of asynchronous communication – written correspondence – where a letter or message is received, read and replied to some time after the writer has sent it. The response time depends on both the technological delays in communication and the human delays in responding. Learners using email and/or computer conferencing may expect a fast response, and feel frustrated if a message goes unanswered for several days, or they may regard the delay as an opportunity to think about an issue and prepare a more considered response.

Small groups can use email for short-term conferences by sending messages on a specific topic (usually identified in the 'subject' line of the email) to each other, such as a regular discussion among a group of tutors of an effective writing course that is offered worldwide. The group meets on-line for about four days each month, discussing tutoring issues, tips and strategies, and ideas for improving the course. These email sessions are archived (saved in an organised set of files for future reference) on a secure website.

Increasingly common in ODL is web-based conferencing, which uses software such as WebCT, WebBoard or First Class to structure a website that serves as the meeting place, or learning environment, for participants. The website is set up to accommodate a series of discussion topics, organised to suit the software and the goals and structure of the course. Participants need consistent access to a computer that can handle the software and a reliable, high-speed Internet connection, from which they take part in the discussion by posting messages to conferences on the website.

The type of course that benefits from on-line sessions is one in which interaction and discussion make significant contributions to learning, and where text is an adequate medium of communication. Computer conferencing may be used in traditional ODL courses as one component of a course that may also include printed study guides, other readings, video, audio, etc., or as an integral component of on-line courses.

On traditional ODL courses, conferences may be available for the duration of the course or

scheduled to cover a specific discussion topic in a certain time-frame and course stage. The course materials, such as a print study guide, are the 'home' resources that integrates all the elements, and on-line sessions are used for interactive learner activities.

In an *on-line course*, almost all of the course resources are presented through the course website, including readings and directions for course activities, and there are usually provisions for ongoing discussion of topics for the duration of the course. An on-line course may be divided into sessions that combine provision of resources with guides for that session. The course website serves as the 'home' resource that integrates all the elements. Activities are presented on the website, then learners' work on the activities is posted into a space on the website that is shared by all participants. The tutor (or moderator) comments on activities and discussions.

Planning tips

Before planning an on-line conference, you should participate in one and observe how the moderator manages the discussion process. You may also find it helpful to complete one of the short on-line courses available in facilitating on-line learning, or to act as a co-tutor or co-moderator on another on-line course, to improve your skills in this role and strengthen your sense of the dynamics of on-line discussions.

Computer conferencing allows for sustained interaction, and ongoing discussion takes place over a period of time, rather than being limited to the time-frame of a meeting or session. Because messages are archived, participants can refer back to previous messages and build on them, so that discussions can develop and evolve over time. An on-line learning session will be more attenuated than a real-time group learning session, as the amount of actual interaction time may be spread over a period of a week, rather than a matter of hours.

Each individual learner makes a series of separate decisions to contribute ideas at different points in time, or to respond to others, and is not as easily influenced by the momentum of group enthusiasm or the visual or auditory cues that help to establish a group connection.

Your planning should take into account that:

- introductory activities should encourage an easy level of communication that will promote effective participation and familiarise learners with the structures of on-line discussions and acceptable communication practices
- mandatory on-line sessions can include topics and activities integral to the course
- optional on-line sessions can enhance and supplement course content, provide forums where groups can work together, or offer help to those having difficulty
- where on-line sessions are part of a conventional ODL course, they must be integrated with other activities
- where the course is completely on-line, each on-line session should be integrated with

other sessions in the course and supported by the on-line resources needed to complete the activities in the session

- learners need to become adept with using on-line communications, typically by posting introductory messages and responses in early sessions, and accustomed to posting and linking ideas, in order to build their skills in developing and synthesising concepts

- learners need to become accustomed to working as part of a group, through research, discussion, debate, problem solving, projects

- although similar to group learning activities in other settings, on-line group activities look different because they are carried out in writing

- initially, simple tasks such as sharing information, can help group members become more accustomed to using the medium for working together and build a sense of group cohesion

- there is a delay between sending and receiving a message, which increases the possibility that a message will go unanswered

- the best use of the medium should exploit its capacity for continuous discussion, keeping long-term records of messages, and offering the 'thinking time' allowed by time delay

- on-line learning involves greater use of individual activities as building blocks for group activities

- on-line learning requires more attention to maintaining cohesion among discrete activities so they move the process in a consistent direction, rather than fragmenting the learners' focus and energy.

Facilitation tips

Check that the technology used for an on-line session allows planned activities to proceed as intended. For example, if you ask learners to review a group of messages and comment on them, make sure that it does not take forever to download and view these messages. Check that if learners follow your instructions, they work. Make sure that learners have another means of contacting you, such as direct email or phone, in case there are problems with the technology. You may need to test or evaluate different conferencing software systems. If so, seek the help of a technical expert who is responsive to on-line learning needs, or use the checklist on the following page.

Criteria for assessing conferencing software
What essential capabilities must be available to allow the course to operate as intended?
What does the software allow you and participants to do, and what will it make difficult or impossible to do?
What are additional features that would be a significant benefit if available?
How easy to use and affordable is this software for you, the designer and the learners?
How much computer capacity and network bandwidth does it require?
Which operating systems and versions are supported?
Does it exclude any operating systems (i.e. Macs or Linux)?
Does it require the acquisition and installation of additional software, in addition to the conferencing software?
Can the software be customised to meet requirements?
Who else has used this software for on-line learning, and for how long?
How compatible is this software with others that are in use in this educational institution?
Does this software present any barriers to learners with disabilities?

When facilitating a group session in an on-line environment or email conference, you should remember that you:

- should check who has signed on and follow up with anyone who has not yet appeared
- should monitor comments to make sure that participants are aware of communication guidelines and are responding appropriately to each other
- should check for indicators of confusion about the discussion framework or procedures, and help to solve any problems
- can encourage learners to take on more self-direction and, where appropriate, leadership roles, in addition to helping groups organise themselves and develop their own ground rules
- may need to help learners to deal with conflict or challenging interpersonal situations in this medium, where words remain visible to everyone, rather than disappearing after they've been said
- can encourage learners to expand their range by taking on more challenging tasks, exploring issues in greater depth, and examining the implications of their learning as they develop their group learning skills
- should ensure that all groups report clear, succinct written summaries of their work back to the group as a whole in a way that interests and engages other participants
- can encourage groups to continue their discussions after they make their small-group report, rather than considering their task complete
- can set up a special "questions and answers" space on the website. While this makes it easier to ask questions, it may also intimidate some learners, who don't want to be seen as stupid. You may need to get things going by posing some questions of your own.

Activity 5.6 Learn about a conferencing technology

Take part in a short computer, video- or audio conference. If you are working on your own, you may need to make arrangements to participate in a conferencing session with your organisation. To practise audio conference tutorials during a face-to-face workshop:

- set up speakerphone equipment in two rooms (preferably some distance apart) that are equipped with phones that are on separate phone lines
- plan activities for the audio conference session, so that two groups can work separately, then meet to discuss their work
- divide into two separate groups, and communicate only by speakerphone for the activities and discussion.

Make notes on your experience of the session, and then:

- evaluate each activity, the structure and effectiveness of the session as a whole, and other issues relevant to your situation

- explain how would you adapt your planning and facilitation strategies for a conference
- identify what you have learned, individually and collectively, from the experience, and what you would do differently the next time.

COMMENT

If you find the experience difficult to arrange or to assess, you may want to try one of the short courses available, or to act as a co-tutor or co-moderator on a course, to improve your skills in this role and strengthen your sense of the dynamics of group contexts.

Activity 5.7 Complete your group learning plan

Now that you have considered the different contexts for group learning and the planning and facilitation issues for each, review and assess each element of your group learning plan against the following criteria:

Does it achieve the stated goals?

Is it feasible, realistic, and appropriate to the learners, content and context?

Does it make the best use of the capabilities of the situation or technology?

COMMENT

You may find that a valuable approach is to implement part of your planned session with a small group that can provide feedback. From this, your answers to the activity, you should be able to identify any modifications needed to your plan for group learning in order to accommodate the particular requirements of the context and technology that will be used.

SUMMARY

Planning and facilitating group learning in ODL differs from conventional classroom instruction because of the differences in learner needs, the context and the resources available. Group learning in ODL involves making the best use of the resources available. In addition to materials and technologies, these include the tutors' and the learners' experience, skills and time. Group learning in ODL usually has more time constraints than in the classroom, so group learning sessions should enable learners to use focused activities to achieve specific goals. Facilitation strategies should enable participants to use group activities to build on what they have learned from their individual studies, rather than be passive recipients of direct instruction. Technologies should complement, rather than override, the goals, processes and outcomes of group learning in ODL.

UNIT 6:
SUPPORTING TUTORS

In Units 1 and 2, we considered the skills and knowledge that tutors need. The next three units looked at the application of those skills and knowledge in three major tutorial roles. This final unit looks at the support, information and resources tutors need from the educational provider in order to use their skills as effectively as possible.

'Very early in the process of tutoring the pedagogical challenges of guiding and counselling students of different abilities, aptitudes and educational aspirations was enormous… The psychological needs for safety and belongingness to a body of like-minded individuals were inhibited by geographical isolation, alienation and fragmentation of teaching. It was difficult to forge close interpersonal relationships with on-site employees because of factors such as staff shortage, cramped physical conditions, lack of facilities for the development of rapport and the continuous intervention by students requiring information.'

(Bennie Berkley, UWI tutor)

Berkley's comments echo those of MacKeracher:

'Learning builds on two intrinsic drives to human action; the desire to develop competence – the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to operate autonomously, and connectedness – the sense of belonging in rewarding relationships.'

(MacKeracher, 1996 quoted in Burge and O'Rourke, 1998)

This unit considers the tutor needs that are met externally, rather than through self-development; specifically, the organisation's role in meeting tutors' needs for connectedness with the educational institution and for the tools for the job. We will review what you have learned from each previous unit to give a framework that identifies a specific set of tutor needs.

As a tutor, you can use this unit to clarify what you will need from the educational provider for your specific role. As an administrator, you can use this unit to identify the resources needed by tutors, such as a tutor guide for your institution, workshops or mentoring arrangements. Whatever your role, you can use this unit to identify what you have achieved so far in your learning about tutoring, and what you still want to accomplish.

IDENTIFYING TUTOR NEEDS AT DIFFERENT PHASES

In order to be effective in their supporting, guiding and enabling learning, and handling administrative tasks, tutors need:

- information

- support

- resources

- skill- and knowledge-development opportunities.

The following list of tutor needs has been drawn from each unit we have covered so far. Because of your own context, skills, knowledge or experiences, you may not need everything on this list, or there may be other needs that you would add.

UNIT 1: THE PLACE OF TUTORING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Before they begin their tutoring role, tutors need:

- information about the specific philosophy and approach of ODL in the institution or organisation

- a clear definition of their role as a tutor, including expectations regarding learner contact, interaction, assessment

- general information about their prospective learners' numbers, backgrounds and goals

- complete course materials

- to know the goals and rationale of the course, and how it fits with other courses in the programme

- access to those who can resolve issues of course design or content.

In academic institutions, tutors also need:

- information about academic standards and requirements that affect the tutor's course

- to know academic schedules and deadlines, e.g. dates when marks must be submitted, appeal deadlines

- information about procedures for assessment and reporting on assessment outcomes
- contact with the academic department or course author to resolve questions about design, content and assessment.

If a course uses technologies like audio conferencing, videoconferencing or computer communications, tutors also need:

- basic information about the technologies used for the course
- an overview of how technologies are used for learning in the specific course
- access to training in the use of any unfamiliar technology
- procedural information specific to each technology
- resources for using technologies, e.g. computer communications software, Internet access or a phone card to cover the costs of contacting learners
- information on using communications technologies for learning interactions, such as discussions or collaborative work, in a manner appropriate to the level of the course and use of the technologies by learners and the tutor.

UNIT 2: CORE ODL TUTORING SKILLS

To use core ODL tutoring skills effectively in carrying out their responsibilities, tutors need:

- opportunities to develop skills in specific aspects of tutoring
- opportunities for consultation with peers
- familiarity with administrative procedures in the educational institution
- access to student records and contact with administration, especially the record-keeping section
- names of persons to contact in administrative units on specific issues
- sufficient information about the standard services available for distance learners, such as library services, so that tutors can refer learners to these services
- information about the resources available for learners' exceptional needs, so that tutors can provide informed referrals to counsellors, disability support services, writing clinics, etc.

UNIT 3: THE SUSTAINING ROLE OF TUTORS

To provide sustaining support for learners, tutors need:

- information about expected strategies and timing for maintaining contact with learners
- information about whom to contact regarding specific learner issues, such as a learner who does not respond, or a learner who indicates an intention to discontinue studies
- access to a 'second opinion' (e.g. a more experienced tutor or an administrator) and/or to resources that can help answer questions or resolve learner issues
- familiarity with the administrative and academic departments, and how they can help

regarding specific issues

- familiarity with accepted strategies for resolving problems

- information about what kinds of issues should be referred to a more senior person.

UNIT 4: ASSESSMENT IN ODL

To apply assessment skills and strategies effectively, tutors need:

- information about expectations regarding assessment of learners (level of detail expected in assessment, turnaround time, policy on resubmissions, etc.)

- knowledge of regulations and requirements that govern assessment practice in the institution or organisation

- access to a second opinion (e.g. a more experienced tutor or an academic administrator) regarding difficult assessment issues

- access to course author or academic staff member to discuss any problems with course materials or ambiguities in assignment instructions that are revealed by the learners' work and/or by assessment outcomes

- knowledge of the organisation's resources to address specific learner needs that become evident through assessment, such as writing skills, language skills, research skills, so that the tutor can provide an informed referral

- access to feedback on assessment from a more experienced tutor (or a peer tutor).

UNIT 5: FACILITATING GROUP LEARNING

To become effective facilitators of group learning, tutors need:

- opportunities to discuss their ideas for group learning situations with other tutors and resource persons

- information, training and support, especially for more complex or unfamiliar technologies used for the course

- information about venues for tutorials, (including remote sites for conferenced tutorials) including room layout, media available, staff contacts

- opportunities to discuss learner interactions and tutorial outcomes with more experienced tutors

- access to second opinions on issues that arise in group learning situations, such as learner conflict or difficulties in group projects.

THE NEED FOR CONNECTEDNESS

Because many tutors work part-time and at a distance from the educational institution, they can face the same barriers that alienate learners:

- lack of contact

- insufficient information

- facing administrative or academic hurdles with inadequate support.

In addition to the practical skills required, effective tutors are sustained by a sense of connectedness to the institution. This develops as a result of practical, supportive and consistent responsiveness on the part of the institution and opportunities for tutors to make meaningful contributions to the organisation. The tutor's need for practical support is linked to the need for connectedness:

'When I began distance tutoring, I indicated (several times) that I would like a referral to other tutors; I suppose you could say to benchmark my own work. About two years later I belatedly received a list of other tutors in my subject areas, by which time I was confident enough in my work that the contacts were utterly redundant (this begs the question of whether the delay was tactical. I think not!) I feel quite separate from the college, and view them more as a coordinator than an employer.'

(Peachey, 1999)

Part-time tutors are at a disadvantage when dealing with administrative issues:

'Administrative problems which hinder the work of part-time tutors take on a greater significance than if these tutors were full-time staff who could easily sort out their problems. Thus, both distance tutors and distance learners find that administrative issues either assist them or hamper their progress in significant ways.'

(Chadibe, 2002)

Chadibe also comments on the reciprocal nature of both practical support and connectedness:

'If tutors do not get the guidelines from the academic departments, they will not know if they are following the intentions of the academic departments when teaching tutorials. Tutors can also provide valuable feedback that could be of great benefit to academic departments in the adaptation of user-friendly materials.'

UWI tutor Bennie Berkley explains:

'Meeting other tutors encouraged the development of acceptance and belongingness. Similar problems and experiences were shared in an atmosphere of congeniality and collegiality….'

Meeting the need for connectedness makes tutors much more effective, as well as satisfying a personal need.

IDENTIFYING TUTOR NEEDS IN A SPECIFIC SITUATION

Tutor needs in a specific ODL situation are affected by the organisational and social contexts, the type of program and the tutors' and organisation's level of ODL experience. Tutors need

to identify, articulate and communicate their needs in a specific situation so that best use can be made of limited resources. We will now use your own experience and perspective as a tutor or administrator to identify collective tutor needs for information, support, access to administrative resources, and skill development.

Activity 6.1 Identifying and meeting tutor needs

Using the list of tutor needs in the last section as a basis, identify what you need to meet your areas of responsibility in your context.

General areas of responsibility	Needs			
	Information	**Support**	**Resources**	**Skill development**
Sustaining learners				
Assessing learning				
Facilitating learning				
Handling administrative tasks				

COMMENT

The identification of the relevant needs for each area of responsibility will allow you to develop a plan for setting up a comprehensive support system for tutors, and by extension, learners.

DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR TUTORS

A plan for developing a comprehensive support system for tutors can be derived from the training needs analysis that you created in the grid of the last activity as follows.

1   Identify the top five or ten tutor needs most important in your context.

2   Prepare an explanation about why each item on your list is important by considering the implications for tutors, for their learners, and for their organisation.

3   Discuss and review your list with colleagues, if possible.

4   Think about what options are available to address these tutor needs. These might include printed tutor guides, induction workshops, mentoring arrangements or regular tutor meeting sessions.

5   Match each tutor need on your priority list with one or more strategies that you feel would be workable.

6   Identify the best timing for implementing each strategy. Would it be better to implement it before the course begins, or when tutors are actively engaged in tutoring? Would it be better to group together a number of strategies, such as a session on assessment and a briefing from administrators, or would it be easier to hold two separate sessions?

7   Develop a plan and a schedule for addressing these tutor needs.

8   Include non-formal strategies in your plan, such as buddy systems in which two tutors provide support and help to each other, or provisions for a less experienced tutor to obtain help from a tutor with more experience.

9   Identify the costs of implementing the plan by costing each strategy, including factors such as communications, transportation, supplies, and so on.

10 Consider which strategies are the most appropriate, affordable, and accessible.

APPROACHES TO MEETING TUTOR NEEDS

Institutions attempt to meet the support needs of tutors through two main channels:

•   printed materials

•   peer contact with other professionals, whether as fellow tutors or in training sessions.

PRINTED MATERIALS

Educational institutions produce institutional tutor guides providing basic information about tutoring in ODL for that institution or organisation, and course-specific tutor guides that outline how to tutor a specific course. These two types of guides serve different purposes.

Institutional tutor guides

An institution's tutor guide:

•   explains how ODL works in that organisation

- outlines the procedures and schedules for tutoring courses
- provides information about departments or units involved in ODL
- lists contact names that tutors need to know.

This serves as a reference for tutors and is intended to provide information, not skills development. These guides need to be revised frequently so that information in them is up to date.

The advantage of an institutional tutor guide, especially for those outside the organisation, is that it provides, in one handy reference, the essential information that tutors need. If the programme is large or complex, all the institutional information may not fit in one guide, and units within the organisation (such as academic departments) might produce their own tutor guide.

Course-specific tutor guides

'One of the roles of academic coordinators is to provide tutors with clear course guidelines and specific areas that need attention for the specific course they are tutoring.'

(Chadibe, 2002)

In addition to organisational guides, tutors need information about tutoring their specific course. Many distance education providers ask course authors to develop tutor guides for specific courses. These are important if course tutors were not involved in developing the course, and to ensure consistency of approach to facilitating and assessing learning, especially for large-enrolment courses. A course-specific tutor guide covers:

- the background of the course and the learners
- the goals and objectives of the course
- how the activities and assignments contribute to the goals and objectives
- the usual timetable for the course
- any unusual features that will require special attention
- guidelines about assessment
- the requirements for specific grades in assignments.

PEER AND OTHER PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Tutor guides provide essential information about the institution or the course, but cannot answer all questions that arise while tutoring. Tutors can more effectively respond if support is provided to them through:

- training workshops
- mentoring arrangements
- regular tutor meetings
- on-call help for tutors.

Training workshops

'Participation in a number of workshops geared toward apprising tutors of their roles and responsibilities went a long way in improving professional competence. Activities were meaningful since they often simulated real-life situations tutors are likely to encounter.'

(Bennie Berkley, UWI tutor)

Workshops can be very effective, but they can also be costly in terms of staff time and payment for tutors' travel and attendance. They can:

- help tutors find out how ODL operates in the organisation
- give tutors a chance to meet people in the organisation who are directly involved in ODL
- provide opportunities for skill development
- help overcome a tutor's sense of isolation.

Timing is important. Typically, tutor workshops are offered before the course or programme begins, especially if they are intended as preparation for new tutors. However, if the only tutor training provided is before courses begin and before tutors have had contact with learners, some of the situations and skill development may not seem relevant. Skills development or information transfer is often more effective when tutors are actively engaged with learners and dealing with specific tutoring or learning situations.

One organisational dilemma is whether all tutors, or just new tutors, must attend training workshops. If attendance is a job requirement, then tutors may expect to be paid to participate. If not, then it may be only the most committed tutors who attend.

Mentoring arrangements

These may be formal or informal. In a formal arrangement, the institution assigns an experienced tutor to mentor one or more new tutors by offering advice and information and, possibly, checking and providing feedback on sample marked assignments. In an informal situation, new tutors can contact experienced tutors when they want, or experienced tutors keep in touch with, and offer support to, new tutors.

Mentoring acknowledges the value of experienced tutors' skills and knowledge, enables new tutors to benefit from their experience, and helps tutors and their mentors overcome isolation. However, it is difficult to monitor informal communications between a mentor and a new tutor, which may be a problem if mentors are very set in their ways, or convey attitudes or approaches unhelpful to new tutors.

Regular tutor meetings

Regular tutor meetings facilitate discussion of issues as they arise, allowing tutors to develop new approaches or skills when they are most needed. Regular meetings also help to overcome the isolation of tutors who work outside the organisation, but they are costly in

transport and staff time. Even if tutors are not paid for attendance, there are staff costs for coordinating meetings. On-line or phone conferences can be more convenient if tutors have email or phone access.

Email conferences can be very effective if they are regular sessions taking place over a three- or four-day period each month. Email conferences:

*   allow people to participate when they can and to raise topics or issues from the past month's tutoring practice
*   can be archived to form the basis for a 'casebook' of situations
*   can record tutors' views on specific topics for future reference
*   can be used to practise and model effective interaction in on-line discussions.

For example, tutors of effective writing courses offered through the Commonwealth of Learning (Writing Effectively for UNHCR; Writing Effectively for WHO/UNAIDS, Writing Effectively for the Red Cross) meet regularly through email to discuss tutoring issues and share tips on effective tutoring strategies.

Teleconferenced tutor meetings can be viable if tutors are available at the same time, and phone costs are affordable. Teleconferenced meetings are most effective if participants submit their list of topics and priorities for discussion in advance, and an agenda is created from these. Teleconferences also enable tutors to practise their teleconferencing skills and explore different ways of using the medium.

On-call help for tutors

The normal arrangement for on-call help is to have designated members of administrative and academic staff available for tutors to call for help and information on relevant issues. On-call help should be prompt and readily available, and it can be provided by telephone, email or fax.

ENSURING THAT TUTORS ARE APPROPRIATELY EQUIPPED

So far, we have outlined how to identify and provide for tutors' needs. The following checklists, one set for tutors, one for administrators, can be used to enable tutors and administrators to reach consensus on what tutors need, or as a planning resource to prepare for tutoring in ODL. They cover the tutoring process:

*   before the course
*   during the course
*   when assessing learners
*   after the course.

TUTOR CHECKLIST 1 – BEFORE THE COURSE

Information	Do I have all the course materials that learners receive?
	Do I understand how the course operates: what learners are expected to do, and what I am expected to do?
	Do I have a copy of the tutor guide for the course?
	Do I have the course timetable for tutorials, learner interaction, assignment dates, marking time, etc.?
	Have I tried some of the self-assessment activities and do I understand their relation to the course content?
	Do I understand the goals of each assignment and how they relate to the course content?
	Do I have the names and contact information for all the learners in the course?
	Do I know the expectations regarding contacting learners: frequency, type of contact, etc.?
	Do I have information about academic and administrative regulations that affect the course?
	Do I have contact information for an on-site person for all the tutorial locations?
	Do I have contact information for an administrator who handles assignment receipt and return?
Support	Do I know whom to contact if I have any questions about the course content and process?
	Do I know whom to contact if I have questions about specific learners?
	Do I know how and where to get help with using technologies required for the course?
	Is there a more experienced tutor I can contact informally about difficult issues?
	Do I have the names of other tutors in the same department, or subject area, or region?
Resources	Do I have the names of librarians who provide services to distance learners?
	Do I know what library services and resources are available to distance learners?
	Do I have the names of counsellors who can help learners with study problems or with personal issues?
	Do I know what extra help is available for learners (writing clinics or support for those with disabilities)?
Development	Do I have the software, technical information, passwords and specialist equipment I need to tutor the course?
	I am most confident about the following aspects of tutoring:
	I am least confident about the following aspects of tutoring:
	I think the best way to address my skill development needs is:

TUTOR CHECKLIST 2 – DURING THE COURSE

Information	Have I verified the names and contact information for all learners in the course and contacted every learner?
	Do I know how to proceed if I cannot contact a learner?
	If parts of the course are unclear to learners, can I get the information needed to explain them?
Support	Can I get answers to academic issues (questions about course content, submitting alternative assignments)?
	Can I get answers to administrative issues (e.g. a request to postpone submitting an assignment)?
	Can the learners and I get timely help about using technologies required for the course?
	Can I ensure that tutorial sites are available and equipped for sessions?
	Can I get a second opinion about issues that arise from interactions with learners?
	Are there opportunities to discuss experiences of tutorials and other learner interactions with other tutors?
Resources	Can learners get help from counsellors or other learner support services when they need it?
	If not, do I know the extent of my responsibility towards those learners?
	Can learners get help, information and materials they need from information centres in the institution?
	If not, can I address the problem?
Development	When interacting with learners, I feel most confident about:
	When interacting with learners, I feel least confident about:
	I think the best way to develop the skills I need for facilitating learner interaction is:

TUTOR CHECKLIST 3 – LEARNER ASSESSMENT

Information	Do I know what is expected of each assignment?
	Do I have the information I need to develop a marking scheme for each assignment?
	Do I have the regulations governing assignment marking, resubmissions, issues about potential plagiarism?
	Do I know the procedures for handling a learner's appeal regarding an assignment mark?
	Do I know the extent of my authority for making decisions about learners' work?
	Do I know who should handle decisions that are beyond my authority?
Support	Can I get a second opinion about issues that arise from marking assignments?
	Are there opportunities to discuss general assessment issues with other tutors?
	Will a senior staff member review sample marked assignments and comment on my assessment practice?
Resources	Can I access the resources that learners may use for their assignments, such as journals, books, software, etc.?
	Do I know enough about learner resources (skill development courses on writing or research, library resources, software, access to assessment for learning disabilities, etc.) to recommend them when needed?
Development	When assessing learners' work, I feel most confident about:
	When assessing learners' work, I feel least confident about:
	I think the best way to develop the skills I need for learner assessment is:

TUTOR CHECKLIST 4 – AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE COURSE

Information	Do I know all the requirements that learners must meet to pass the course?
	Do I know when to submit marks and other information required for student records?
	Do I know the procedures for handling learners' evaluations of the course?
	Will I receive information about the learner outcomes on the final exam, if I am not marking them?
Support	Do I have access to timely help with any difficult final assessment decisions?
	Can I convey my observations, experiences and reflections on tutoring to someone who can change the course?
Resources	Do I have access to learners' feedback on the course and on the tutoring, to help me identify what tutoring strategies worked well, and which ones may need improvement?
	Do I have the opportunity to recommend additional resources that may be helpful for this course?
Development	From the experience of tutoring this course, and from the feedback on the course evaluations, these are the aspects of tutoring that I handled well; and these are the aspects of tutoring that I would like to improve:
	I think the best way to further develop my skills would be:

ADMINISTRATOR CHECKLIST 1 — BEFORE THE COURSE

Information	Have we provided tutors with copies of all the materials that learners receive, including course materials, information about the institution, information about other resources available?
	Have we given tutors a written guide that explains their role and what they are expected to do in providing learner support, learner assessment, and in fulfilling their administrative tasks?
	Have we given tutors a complete list of their learners' names and contact information?
	Have we given tutors the names and contact information for administrative staff who deal with distance learners?
	Have we informed tutors whom to contact about academic issues, and do they have contact information for these people?
	Have we informed tutors of all the technical requirements for tutoring the course, such as hardware, software, media equipment, and do they have the means to meet these requirements?
	Have we given tutors the information they need for providing tutorials, such as site locations and contact persons, audio conference procedures, etc.?
Support	Do tutors have a specific contact person in the administrative area who can handle their administrative questions?
	Do tutors have a specific contact person in the academic area who can handle their academic questions?
	Are there provisions for new tutors to consult more experienced tutors?
	Will tutors be briefed by the course author or coordinator about academic issues related to their specific course?
	Is there a general tutor orientation session before the courses start?
Resources	Have we ensured that tutors have all the resources they need for tutoring, such as software for computer communications, assignment marking sheets, etc.?
	Have we ensured that tutors have access to any resources they may need for tutoring, such as library services, computer databases, lab equipment, etc.?
	Have we given tutors adequate information about services and resources available for distance learners, such as counselling, help with academic skills?
	Do tutors have access to technical help for any of the technology used in the course and do they know how to obtain this help?
Development	Are there opportunities for new tutors to learn about key aspects of tutoring such as learner contact, assessment, and so on?
	Are there opportunities for experienced tutors to learn about mentoring newer tutors, or to develop new skills needed for different tutoring strategies such as facilitating group learning at a distance?

ADMINISTRATOR CHECKLIST 2 – DURING THE COURSE

Information	Have we provided tutors all the up-to-date information about learners, including new additions or deletions to the list of learners in the course?
	Are there provisions for administrative staff to follow up if tutors cannot make contact with a learner?
Support	Are academic staff available to answer questions about the course content, or about any difficult issues that have arisen?
	Are administrative staff available to answer questions about administrative issues such as ensuring venues are available for tutorials?
	Can tutors consult with a more senior tutor or other appropriate staff member about issues that arise during interactions with learners?
	Can tutors exchange ideas with each other about issues that arise, effective strategies, and so on?
Resources	Are tutors reporting any problems about learners obtaining access to resources they need such as library service, technical help, etc.?
	If so, are there provisions for remedying the situation in a timely way?
	Are tutors reporting any difficulties with tutorial arrangements such as problems with venues, technical issues, any barriers to learner participation?
	If so, are there provisions for remedying the situation in a timely way?
Development	Are there any indications that tutors may need to develop specific skills in order to meet their learners' needs (e.g. skills in facilitating tutorials, or technical skills)?
	If so, can appropriate, timely skill development opportunities be provided?

ADMINISTRATOR CHECKLIST 3 – LEARNER ASSESSMENT

Information	Have we given tutors all the information needed on assignment requirements, regulations and procedures?
	Have we told tutors when to expect to receive assignments, and when to return the marked assignments?
	Have we advised tutors whom to contact about academic or administrative questions regarding assignments?
Support	Can tutors consult with a more senior tutor or other staff person regarding a difficult assessment issue?
	Do tutors have prompt access to an appropriate person to consult about plagiarism or other academic offences?
	Are tutors' marked assignments reviewed to ensure that marking is appropriate, to provide feedback to tutors and to identify tutoring skills that need improvement?
Resources	Have we ensured that tutors have access to resources that learners may use for their assignments such as books, articles, software?
	Are there adequate provisions for remedial help for learners – such as writing or math clinics – so that tutors can confidently advise learners to seek this help?
Development	Are there provisions for enabling tutors to develop specific skill areas they may need for assessing learners (e.g. different assessment strategies, new software, etc.)?

ADMINISTRATOR CHECKLIST 4 – AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE COURSE

Information	Have we informed tutors of all requirements for learners to pass the course?
	Have we informed tutors of all deadlines for submitting learners' marks and other information required by academic and administrative regulations?
	If tutors are involved in providing course evaluation forms to learners, have we informed them of the appropriate procedure?
	Do tutors receive information on learners' final exam results if they are not marking the final exam?
Support	Can tutors get a timely opportunity to consult with the appropriate person regarding any learner issues that may affect the learner's final grade?
	Do tutors have an opportunity to provide, to the course author or the academic department, their observations and feedback from tutoring the course?
Resources	Do tutors receive a summary of learners' evaluations of the course?
	Do tutors have an opportunity to discuss, with an appropriate staff person, the learners' evaluation of the course and other issues that might help to identify the tutor's skill development needs?
	Do tutors have an opportunity to meet with providers of other services, such as librarians, or counsellors, to discuss any issues or observations for learners who used these services?
Development	Are there provisions for tutors to discuss their own skill development needs with someone who can help them address those needs?

The next activity considers whether tutors have all the administrative, academic and technological tools and equipment they need for their day-to-day tasks. Preparing to tutor in ODL is a bit like packing your bags for a journey – you need to ensure that you have the essentials before you set out.

Activity 6.2: Do tutors have everything they need?

Review the checklists given above for your role as tutor or administrator. These checklists suggest the essentials; you may want to add other items that are specific to your context, or exclude items that are not relevant to your situation.

COMMENT:

Administrators should be able to use the checklists to present an overview of the whole process of meeting tutor needs and should be able to answer questions about all the phases of the tutoring experience.

Experienced tutors should be able to recall their previous experience and complete all the checklist questions, but new tutors may not be as certain about phases of the tutoring process that they have not yet encountered.

If tutors and administrators compare their checklists and discuss the information, support, resources and skill development opportunities that tutors need, they can then use the checklists in their respective roles to ensure that the essentials are available for tutors to do their job.

COOPERATIVE PLANNING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This unit has provided several opportunities to consider tutors' learning needs from the viewpoint of the tutors and the administrators. Comparing notes with colleagues can provide a stronger picture of what tutors need, and a good basis for planning professional development.

If you are a tutor, review your learning plan to assess the extent to which your work on this guide has helped you to address your skill development needs and identify the strategies that were most helpful in your own development. The skills and knowledge you have acquired can help plan further professional development for yourself and your colleagues. As you become a more experienced tutor and venture into new forms of ODL, you will encounter new questions and issues that require you to add to your skills.

If you are an administrator, using this guide and other tools, such as feedback from learners and administrators, in consultation with tutors, should have helped identify tutors' professional development needs.

Recent research on professional development (Igareshi *et al.* 2002) shows that professionals do not always accurately identify their own learning needs, tending to focus on learning about new areas in their field rather than on skills needed for everyday tasks, reflecting their desire to explore something new rather than revisit known territory. However, external assessment of the same professionals indicated that they needed to deepen and refresh their everyday skills. The assessment and planning tools in the first units of this guide can be a useful resource in planning professional development for tutors, and *Staff Development in Open and Flexible Learning*, edited by Colin Latchem and Fred Lockwood, provides many helpful ideas from experienced practitioners.

STRENGTHENING THE LINK BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICE

Evidence suggests tutors are keen to participate in, and apply what they gain from, professional development if it enables them to make a direct contribution. Research into tutors' attitudes towards professional development shows:

'Participant feedback and anecdotal evidence from the research suggest that professional development through participation in learning conversations is valued for its own sake, and that its potential to support accredited status is a secondary benefit.'

(Tait, 2002)

By engaging tutors in learning conversations in which they shared their diverse experiences on a particular topic in tutoring, Tait enabled them to:

'represent and reproduce their personal approach to excellence because of their interest in the topic and their attraction to the research approach'.

One participant in an essay-marking project said:

'I have been made aware of my own practice. The activity was much more conducive to development than the usual evening or day courses, however well planned they are... they tend to be more information-based. It has boosted my confidence in terms of my "taking charge" of my practice.'

Enabling tutors to contribute to, as well benefit from, professional development, addresses concerns about unused training:

'The transfer of training from events such as workshops to real work situations is a complex process. Unused, learning acquired through training is often forgotten or becomes a source of frustration on the part of the learner – or both.'

(Robinson, 1998)

Classroom teachers typically ask of professional development, 'How will this help me do what I need to do on Monday?' ODL tutors ask, 'How will this help me to deal with the learners' assignments that are coming in next week?' or 'How will this help me to be more effective at encouraging learners to develop their own learning skills?' Robinson points out that, to be effective, training must be applicable to practice, necessitating coordination between organisation, trainers and learners. As Tait demonstrated, while formal training is not the only means of providing professional development for tutors, it must be timely, appropriate and accessible in order to be immediately and clearly relevant. Combining formal training sessions with less structured 'learning conversations', can enhance tutors' confidence, competence and connectedness.

IDENTIFYING HOW SUPPORT FOR TUTORS TRANSLATES INTO SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

Evidence and intuition suggests that supporting tutors enables them to support learners better. Tutor support strategies in the Writing Effectively courses offered by the Commonwealth of Learning promote the goals of a learner-centred course. Initiatives to support tutors include regular email discussions and semi-annual workshops, as well as:

'random checks of marked assignments that provides tutors with advice on improving practice, and frequent participant feedback that provides tutors with concrete evidence of the effectiveness of their joint endeavour'.

(Parchoma, 2003)

These strategies were the outcome of:

'careful matching of learner, tutor and administrative needs and goals to policies and activities that supported these needs and goals'.

(Parchoma, 2003)

The Open University's Student Support Research Group is investigating how assessment supports learning. Teachers will ask learners about how they respond to assessment activities and feedback; they will use this information to change assessment and then evaluate the effect to determine how assessment can make a positive impact on the way that students learn. (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002)

Tutors and administrators are well placed to assemble evidence of the link between support for tutors and support for learners. Tutors can record how getting clear information and guidelines from the institution helps them to respond promptly to learners' questions and how feedback from mentors helps improve their practice. Administrators can observe tutors' responses to professional development, provision of information, library services and computer support, as well as tracking the longer-term outcomes for learners.

This evidence enables ODL administrators to justify investment in tutor support and so make ODL more responsive to a greater range of learners.

SUMMARY

As you worked through this unit you may have become aware of gaps between tutor needs and the resources available to them. This is not unusual in ODL, due to limited resources and conflicting values and perceptions of the tutor's role.

'In the OU, as in other institutions, there is a tension between the economic necessity to maintain course tutors as a peripheral, flexible (and disposable) workforce and the pedagogical, quality agenda which places these same teachers at the centre of the student learning relationship.'

(Tait, 2002)

You may not be able to address this institutional tension in your context, but you can raise awareness of tutors' needs and make incremental changes that will help address tutors' needs and, by extension, learners' needs. This builds the tutors' sense of connectedness to the organisation and strengthens the organisation's links with tutors. Tait (2002) quotes Bascia and Hargreaves (2000), who suggest that educational change:

'must connect teachers to the system and society in an activist way, where they can see themselves not just as effects of the context, but as part of the context, contributors to it, and as agents who can and must influence how others perceive, shape and support their work'.

By working together to ensure that tutors are equipped to meet their responsibilities to learners, administrators and tutors can begin to connect their two worlds, making the ODL provider more responsive to learners. They can achieve this through cooperative planning for staff development, strengthening the link between professional development and application to practice and identifying how support for tutors translates into support for learners.

APPENDIX A:
SAMPLE STUDY PLANS

These sample study plans suggest ways in which you can use this handbook when planning skill development for prospective tutors in several different situations.

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PLAN

This is a sample study plan for using this handbook to develop your individual skills as a tutor. It outlines activities to complete, in addition to reading each unit.

Week	Unit	Topics and Activities	Strategies
1	Intro	Activity 0.1	Learning journal, discussions with colleagues
	1	Tutoring in ODL. Activity 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7	Learning journal, reflection, discussions with colleagues
2	1	Activity 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, 1.14	Reflection, learning journal, feedback on Activity 1.13
3	2	Core tutoring skills. Activity 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7	Reflection, discussion with colleagues and/or learners, learning journal
	3	The sustaining role of tutors. Activity 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5	Learning journal, peer feedback
4	3	Activity 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9	Learning journal, peer feedback
	4	Assessment. Activity 4.1, 4.2, 4.3	Reflection, learning journal, discussions with colleagues
5	4	Activity 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7	Peer feedback
6	5	Planning and facilitating group learning. Activity 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7	Learning journal, discussions with colleagues
7	5	Activity 5.6 (if using technology for group learning)	Consultations with colleagues, practice session
	6	Supporting tutors. Activity 6.1, using Tutor's checklists, Activity 6.2	Discussions with colleagues, learning journal

A WORKSHOP PLAN FOR TEACHERS WITHOUT ODL EXPERIENCE

This is a sample study plan for using this handbook for face-to-face group skill development for prospective tutors in the same context who have teaching experience but are unfamiliar with ODL

Session	Unit	Topics and Activities	Time	Strategies
1	Intro	Activity 0.1	30 mins	Individual work, pair discussion
	1	Tutoring in ODL. Activity 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.10, 1.11, 1.12	120 mins	Pair and/or group discussion
2	2	Core tutoring skills. Activity 2.1	30 mins	Group discussion
	3	The sustaining role of tutors. Activity 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7	60 mins	Small-group work. Small groups can each take one activity, followed by large-group discussion of findings
		Activity 3.8, 3.9 can serve as a guide for briefing about organisational expectations about tutors' record keeping and administration	30 mins	Presentation, questions and answers
3	4	Assessment. Activity 4.1	30 mins	Pair and group work, short presentation
		Activity 4.4, Activity 4.6,	90 mins	Pair work, group discussion
4	5	Planning and facilitating group learning. Activity 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7	90 mins	Pair or group work, group discussion
	6	Supporting tutors. Activity 6.1, using Tutor's checklists, Activity 6.2	30 mins	Group discussion

A DISTANCE COURSE FOR TEACHERS WITHOUT ODL EXPERIENCE

Following is a sample study plan for using this handbook to provide distance-delivered group skill development for prospective tutors who have formal teaching experience but little experience in ODL. The plan assumes that participants will read the handbook and suggests options for group discussion or for guidance by a mentor, where these are feasible.

Week	Unit	Topics and Activities	Strategies
1	Intro	Activity 0.1	Participants' discussion of goals (by email, teleconferencing) if possible
	1	Tutoring in ODL. Activity 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7	Group discussion, or mentor provides summary of all responses to all learners
2	1	Activity 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13	Mentor response to Activities 1.10, 1.13
3	2	Core tutoring skills. Activity 2.1	Mentor input to clarify tutors role, group discussion
	3	The sustaining role of tutors. Activity 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5	Group or pair discussion
4	3	Activity 3.7, 3.8, 3.9	Mentor feedback to each learner on one of Unit 3 activities
	4	Assessment. Activity 4.1, 4.2, 4.3	Group or pair discussion
5	4	Activity 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7	Pairs of participants can use Activity 4.5 to critique Activity 4.6
6 and 7	5	Planning and facilitating group learning. Activity 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7	Pair work, peer assessment, mentor feedback
7	5	Activity 5.6 (if participants will be using technology for group learning)	Pair work, mentor feedback
8	6	Supporting tutors. Activity 6.1, using Tutor's checklists, Activity 6.2	Group discussion

A WORKSHOP PLAN FOR TUTORS WITHOUT TEACHING OR ODL EXPERIENCE

Following is a sample study plan for using this handbook for face-to-face skill development for prospective tutors who do not have formal teaching experience. You might use this study plan for briefing people with specialised skills in a profession or trade who will be tutoring learners in their field.

Session	Unit	Topics and Activities	Time	Strategies
1	Intro	Activity 0.1	30 mins	Individual work, pair discussion
	1	Tutoring in ODL. Activity 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 1.12	150 mins	Pair and/or group discussion
2	2	Core tutoring skills. Activity 2.1	30 mins	Group discussion
	3	The sustaining role of tutors. Activity 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7	60 mins	Small-group work. Small groups can each take one activity, followed by large-group discussion of findings
		Activity 3.8, 3.9 can serve as a guide for briefing on organisational expectations about tutors' record keeping and administration	30 mins	Presentation, questions and answers
3	4	Assessment. Activity 4.1, 4.2	60 mins	Pair and group work, short presentation
		Activity 4.4, 4.6	90 mins	Short presentation, pair work, group discussion
4	5	Planning and facilitating group learning. Activity 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7	90 mins	Pair or group work, group discussion
5	5	Supporting tutors. Activity 5.6 (if using technology for group learning)	90 mins	Group work and discussion

APPENDIX B:
NOTES FOR FACILITATORS

If you are planning skill development for tutors, you can use or adapt the activities for your group. The activities are addressed directly to the learner. The activities listed below have notes for facilitators that provide additional information about using the activity.

Activity 0.1 Your goals

You can encourage learners to express their goals in terms of what they want to achieve by completing a tutor training programme. If learners leave out any important goals that are essential for open and distance learning, you can introduce this goal during the discussion.

Activity 1.1 A Good learning experience

Participants can complete this activity in three stages: an individual reflective activity that should take about 5 minutes; a pair discussion sharing your initial reflections that should take about 10 minutes, and a group discussion sharing conclusions and identifying areas of general consensus and/or disagreement that should take about 10 minutes.

Activity 1.4 A good ODL experience

Groups working on this activity may require about 40 minutes to discuss and summarise their ideas.

Activity 1.8 Who are your learners?

If participants have learners with different characteristics, it may be helpful for participants to compare the characteristics of their learners and discuss the implications for learning.

Activity 1.10 What would you want a tutor to do?

Participants could work in small groups, each group selecting one or two situations to discuss at some length, and then sharing a summary of their findings with everyone. A small-group discussion of one or two situations may take about a half hour. Small or large groups could then take about half an hour to discuss the reasons why learners need tutors.

Keep in mind the principles of open and distance learning as you complete this activity.

Activity 1.11 Tutor roles and responsibilities

Participants could divide into groups so that those in similar roles work together to complete the table. After completing their small-group discussions, all participants can compare their conclusions and try to reach a consensus about the tutors' role.

Activity 1.12 Tutors' knowledge and skills

In a group discussion, each small group could discuss one of these areas, and then share their findings with the group as a whole. In a workshop setting, if small groups take on each area, it should take about a half hour for small-group discussions and a whole-group summary.

Activity 1.13 Develop a learning plan

In a group context, each participant should complete their own plan, and then discuss it with one other participant. In a whole-group session, participants can share their observations about their goals and learning strategies.

Activity 2.1 The tutor's perspective

In a workshop or group discussion, small groups can discuss two or three of the situations so they can consider a variety of tutor roles and skill requirements. Each participant should complete the second part individually, and then discuss his or her observations with one other person.

Activity 3.2 Welcoming learners

Each participant should work individually on their own welcome message (this part should take between 10 and 20 minutes). Participants should then work in pairs to review each other's messages; this review and discussion should take between 10 and 20 minutes.

Activity 3.3 Keeping in touch with learners

Invite participants to discuss each part of the activity with one other participant, or in a small group. When participants have completed this first discussion, you could suggest that people combine their groups and comment on each other's proposed strategies.

Activity 3.7 Discovering the problem

In a workshop or group setting, participants can discuss one or two situations in pairs or small groups, then review their assessments with the large group.

Activity 3.8 Keeping track of learners

Participants can discuss these questions in a small group, and then share their ideas with the group as a whole. If all participants are from the same organisation, it will be helpful to have an administrator available to explain record-keeping procedures.

Activity 3.9 Handling administrative questions

Participants can complete this exercise in pairs. Each person can prepare a short list of administrative questions, and then exchange them with their partner, who should develop answers to them. It should be possible to complete this task in 30 to 40 minutes.

Activity 4.1 Learning through assessment

Participants should take about ten minutes to think about their own experience. Then, working in pairs for about 15 minutes, they can discuss the positive features of each other's experience. In small groups, they can then start to compile their lists, which can be compared in a whole-group discussion taking about 20 minutes.

Activity 4.2 Purposes of assessment

Participants can work as individuals or in small groups to prepare their lists first (this should take between 10 and 15 minutes), then review their lists with one other person or small group.

Activity 4.3 Design and evaluate an assignment

Participants can work individually on their assignment plan, or they could work with one other person who is also familiar with the course. It may take about 30 minutes to plan the assignment. Allow about the same amount of time to evaluate each other's plans, in pairs or small groups. The whole group could then discuss what they have learnt from preparing and evaluating their plans.

Activity 4.4 What learners expect from tutor assessment

Participants can write down their ideas and then exchange them with a partner and discuss them. Large groups can then assemble a list of learners' expectations of tutors about assessment. The pair work should take from 10 to 15 minutes; the group discussion may take about 20 minutes.

Activity 4.5 Appraise a tutor's approach to marking

Participants may take about 10 to 15 minutes to review the sample assignments individually or in pairs and then, in small groups, discuss their findings and responses to the questions for another 15 to 20 minutes.

Activity 4.6 Practise marking assignments

Each participant should complete their marking individually then exchange their work with one other person for comments and discussion. Participants can share their reflections on the process in a large group.

Activity 4.7 Plan your assessment practice for a course

Participants should complete the two parts of the activity on their own and then exchange their work with another participant for comment and discussion. The pair discussion should take about 30 minutes.

Activity 5.1 The aims of group learning activities

Individual participants can take about 10 minutes to prepare answers to both questions then discuss their responses with the group.

Activity 5.2 The context for group learning

This activity provides a good opportunity for newcomers to learn about the organisational context from more experienced colleagues. Participants from the same institution should work with their colleagues on this activity. If members of the group are all from different organisations, participants can complete the first part of the activity on their own and then compare their situations in a group discussion.

Activity 5.3 Learners' expectations of group learning

Individual participants may need about 10 minutes to write down their expectations; then they can discuss their ideas in pairs or with the group.

Activity 5.4 Planning a group learning activity or session

Participants should complete their own plan before discussing it with one other person or a small group. Ideally, participants should complete their plan before coming to the group session.

Activity 5.5 Review your learning plan

Individual participants can review and modify their plans and then, in a group discussion, explain the reasons for any changes.

Activity 5.6 Learn about a conferencing technology

You can use this activity to plan a briefing session for tutors on the most commonly used ODL technology in your organisation.

Activity 5.7 Complete your group learning plan

Individual participants can assess and adapt their plans and then discuss the process of preparing their plan with one other person or the group as a whole.

Activity 6.1 Identifying and meeting tutor needs

Individual participants should complete the activity on their own first, then discuss it with the group. It would be ideal to include both tutors and administrators in a small group, to enable everyone to share potentially different perspectives on the question and to learn from each other.

Activity 6.2 Checklists: Do tutors have everything they need?

This activity might form part of a briefing session for new tutors and distance learning administrators. Participants can review the checklists individually or in pairs, then discuss them in a small group. During the group discussion, participants should try to reach agreement on the list of essentials. Try to include both tutors and administrators in each discussion group.

Administrators should be able to use the checklists to present an overview of the whole process of meeting tutor needs, and should be able to answer questions about all the phases of the tutoring experience.

Most tutors should be able to consider all the checklist questions. However, new tutors may not be as certain about phases of the tutoring process that they have not yet encountered. Experienced tutors should be able to recall their previous experience and complete all sections at once.

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