



The Vital Cog of E-Tutorship in Open, Distance and eLearning facilitation: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Electronic tutorials (e-tutorials) are an integral part of student support in Open Distance and e-Learning and influence students' learning experience, motivation, and retention. Continual developments in online education and challenges encountered by education participants in resource constrained environments raise a need to conduct more research to better understand the phenomenon of e-tutoring (electronic tutoring) and its improvement. This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of electronic tutors (e-tutors) in a large Open Distance and e-Learning institution in South Africa. Data collection occurred through six semi-structured focus group interviews. The data was then subjected to a thematic analysis and presented through the lens of the Community of Inquiry model. The findings indicate that although e-tutors provide facilitation of learning, technical support, managerial activities, and social integration to foster teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence, not all students were able to participate. Furthermore, the conditions necessary to foster cognitive presence were non-optimal. Recommendations are the broadening of e-tutorials to include all students as well as conducting more research on how to enhance cognitive presence in online courses offered by institutions in developing nations.

Keywords: Online Learning, Electronic Tutorship, Electronic Tutors, Open Distance and eLearning, Community of Inquiry

BACKGROUND

Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institutions attract enormous numbers of students enrolled in a variety of learning programmes. To support these students, ODeL institutions rely on electronic tutoring (or e-tutoring) to provide essential and necessary student support. E-tutoring is a central element in the design and management of online courses (Vegliante & Sannicandro, 2020) and helps students to feel connected to the institution as well as a source of motivation to persist in studies (Joubert & Snyman, 2020). E-tutoring is important in that it contributes to the enhancement of the quality of online learning (Jiménez, Rodriquez & Vidal, 2017) as well as enhancing student success (Miles, 2023). As such, the practice of e-tutoring is integral to the teaching strategy

within ODeL environments, and constitutes activities required to support students in their learning (Shange, 2021).

The practice of e-tutoring is however not static (Vegliante & Sannicandro, 2020) and there are problems of implementation in various contexts. Various barriers could impact students and their abilities to participate in e-tutoring. For example, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are unable to seamlessly participate in e-tutoring which could impact on their learning and success. Unequal digital resources and poor information and communications technologies (ICT) infrastructure in developing nations, from which this study is based, impacts negatively on the delivery of e-tutoring programmes (Mashile, Fynn & Matoane, 2020). There also exist

differences between students in urban and rural areas in terms of their learning characteristics, needs and statuses (Liu & Li, 2020). Factors located within individuals charged with facilitating e-tutoring (electronic tutors or e-tutors) also contributes to the efficacy of the process (Bustos-Contell, Porcuna-Enguix, Serrano-Madrid & Labatut-Serer, 2021; de Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018). There is thus a need to conduct more research on how to improve e-tutoring in ODeL.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are many studies focussing on e-tutoring from the perspectives of ICT requirements (Abdullah & Mtsweni, 2014; Kulik, 2016), student perceptions and participation (Ferrari & Triacca, 2021; Maré & Mutezo, 2021; Tladi, 2013), and e-tutor skills and training (Bustos-Contell et al., 2021; Langesee, 2022; Liu & Li, 2020; Raviolo, Messina, Mauro & Rondonotti, 2021). There is however a dearth of research on the perceptions of e-tutors (de Jong, Verstegen & Könings, 2018) and how they go about performing this important student support function within ODeL environments (de Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018). Although perspectives of institutions (administrators, academics) as well as students provide a valuable view of the phenomenon of e-tutoring, e-tutors, as necessary participants in the process of e-tutoring, could also provide insights into practices that may strengthen student support and hence increase educational outcomes. Understanding factors that impact on e-tutor practices in ODeL environments could contribute to a holistic understanding of e-tutoring as a student support intervention. The lived experiences of e-tutors could also provide valuable input into the design of their professional development, which is a necessary component of e-tutoring. As such, this study used a phenomenological approach to gain insight about e-tutor lived experiences

in ODeL contexts, aimed at identifying areas of improvement in the practice of e-tutoring.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ODeL researchers and course designers have always valued interaction (Anderson, 2003). Interaction (student-student; student-instructor; student-content) thus forms a vital component of e-tutoring that is based on constructivist notions of learning (Mashile & Matoane, 2016). To understand the phenomenon of e-tutoring from the perspective of e-tutors, this study used the Community of Inquiry (CoI) of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) as the conceptual framework. The CoI is based on collaborative constructivist notions as well as computer-mediated communication (CMC) which are central components of e-tutoring.

The CoI consist of three overlapping elements, namely cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (see Figure 1). These presences are functions shared among the course materials, students, and instructor (Richardson, Arbaugh, Cleveland-Innes, Ice, Swan & Garrison, 2012). From a social constructivist perspective, for learning to take place, there is a need for the participants to construct meaning through communication with others. Such a function represents cognitive presence in the CoI framework. The social presence function occurs when participants connect with each other emotionally in the collaborative online environment. For participants to continue their engagement with each other, they need to present themselves as “real people.” The engagement should also be enjoyable and personally fulfilling. The design of educational experiences, as well as the facilitation thereof, constitute the teaching presence. The function of teaching presence is to support and enhance the other core elements of the CoI.

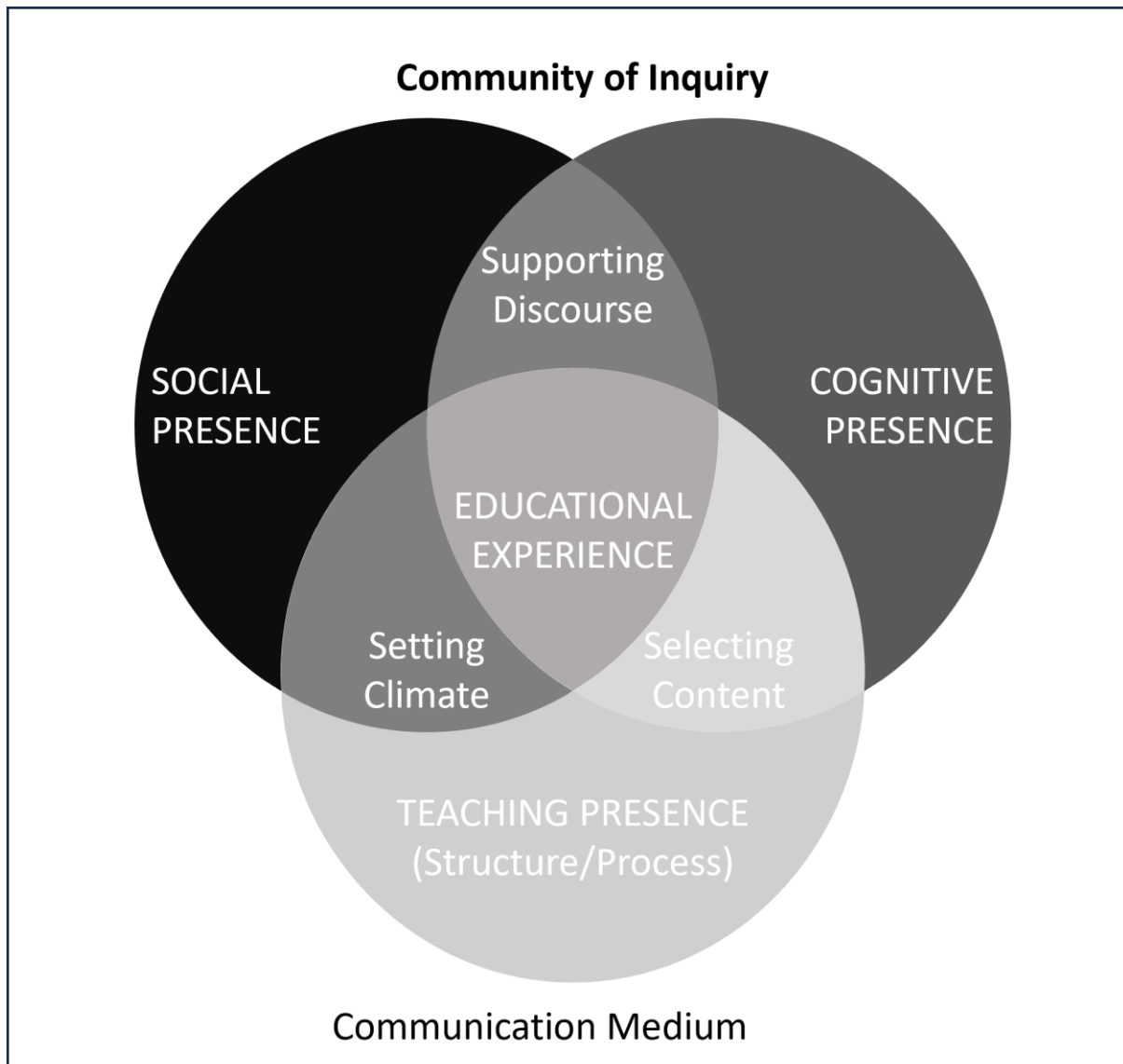


Figure 1 Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison et. al., 2000)

E-TUTORING LITERATURE REVIEW

An e-tutor is an online educational figure who provides academic support to students in e-learning environments (Liu & Li, 2020). Other names of e-tutors include e-moderators (Salmon, 2003; Vasodavan, DeWitt, Alias & Noh, 2020), online tutors (Vegliante & Sannicandro, 2020) or mentors (Raviolo et al., 2021). The e-tutors are mostly non-permanent academic staff helping ODeL institutions with student support in high enrolment learning programmes and courses (Karadag & Özgür, 2020). E-tutors interact with students through CMC formats such as

email, chat, and discussion forums on the learning management system to fulfil their mandate.

Tutoring plays a critical role as part of the learning strategies in higher learning that encourage debate, greater participation, and higher levels of cognitive engagement among students (Hardman, 2016; McKay, 2016). Although the systems of ODeL may differ from one region to another, student support remains a necessary element (Paniagua & Simpson, 2018). Drawing from the long history of the Open University UK in providing distance education, Tait (2014) highlights the central role of e-tutorials and other student support

interventions and argues that developments in ICT make it imperative to move away from stand-alone services to curriculum designs that favour the integration of student support with teaching in ODeL contexts. Creating a conducive student support environment attuned to students' needs could also contribute to increasing student success (Thistoll & Yates, 2016).

Depending on the ODeL system or model followed, e-tutors may assume dissimilar roles. They may be responsible for the entire process of teaching, including assessment, or they may be responsible only for certain student support elements (Bustos-Contell et al., 2021; Ferrari & Triacca, 2021). E-tutors also support a variety of teaching approaches such as problem-based learning (de Jong et al., 2018) and collaborative learning in blended as well as online learning environments (Ferrari & Triacca, 2021; Vegliante & Sannicandro, 2020). Given the diverse contexts in which e-tutors operate, the categorisation of their roles is diverse (Gómez-Rey, Barbera & Fernández-Navarro, 2017; Hung & Chou, 2015; Jiménez et al., 2017). In this study, the categorisation used is the three presences of the CoI.

Social Presence

e-Tutoring creates a social platform for ODeL students to connect with each other and their instructors. Garrison et al. (2000) describes social presence in terms of how individuals project themselves socially and emotionally as part of a community of inquiry using CMC. They contend that the extent to which a student is familiar with the communication medium, their skills, motivation, and engagement with the medium, has a bearing on their social presence. Also, socio-emotional interaction and support is necessary for students to realise learning outcomes. It is thus imperative that e-tutoring provides a vehicle to foster socio-emotional interaction.

E-tutoring helps foster social presence in ODeL (Shange, 2021). First, e-tutors help motivate students to continue studying. Dropout in ODeL is high (Stone, 2019) and motivation help students not to drop out of their studies (Simpson, 2013). E-tutors are thus roped in to motivate students and support them in developing a sense of belonging (Fandino & Velandia, 2020; Mittelmeier, Rogaten, Long, Dalu, Gunter, Prinsloo & Rienties, 2019; Vegliante & Sannicandro, 2020) and inclusion as a valued part of the course (Bustos-Contell et al., 2021). E-tutors also motivate students by providing them with positive reinforcement, framing feedback in an empathetic manner and using the communication medium optimally so that students are actively involved (Fandino & Velandia, 2020). Second, e-tutors help to organise the online learning environment as well as deal with all procedural aspects of the course (Abdullah & Mtsweni, 2014; Krasnova & Demeshko, 2015). To this end, e-tutors assist in organising processes and resources required by the primary instructor in the course (Maré & Mutezo, 2021). Third, given the geographical separation of students from the institution in ODeL, e-tutors help bridge this gap whenever students encounter technological challenges such as logging on, accessing course-related software, uploading assignments, and using educational tools (de Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018). The purpose of the social interventions is to help students to express themselves as real people who participate in the online community of inquiry.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence within the CoI is a mechanism through which instructors can engage students in meaningful educational activities that result in acquisition of higher-order learning outcomes. Cognitive presence is conceptualised in the CoI in terms of learners being able to engage in discourse (or discussions) and sustained reflection in

the communication medium and as a result being able to co-construct knowledge with others (Garrison et al., 2000). The extent to which an individual is cognitively present in a learning encounter has implications for critical inquiry and is an important indicator of quality in online learning (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). However, instructors play a key role in cultivating cognitive presence by structuring course content and implementing instructional strategies that facilitate collaborative learning (Sadaf, Wu & Martin, 2021).

E-tutors, in association with course instructors, assumes a role of cultivating cognitive presence in ODeL environments. First, e-tutors, based on the epistemologies that underpin a particular course, foster cognitive presence by selecting appropriate instructional strategies such as reflection on practice, peer facilitation, or collaborative learning (Sadaf et al., 2021). For example, a teaching team (instructor and e-tutor) in a study by Perrucci, Khanlari and Cacciamani (2020), used knowledge building as a strategy to support knowledge creation and discourse. This teaching team supported discursive interaction by (1) starting discussions through posing questions or identifying problems, (2) demonstrating to students that all ideas could be improved, (3) promoting awareness on how knowledge is advanced, (4) showing the connection between different ideas, and (5) maintaining commitment to the knowledge building process. In this way, e-tutors foster cognitive presence during CMC by structuring course content discussions in ways that encourage the analysis of problems, helping students construct knowledge and confirm meaning. Second, e-tutors develop electronic activities suitable for the communication medium used in the course (Chen, Jiao & Hu, 2021). Third, e-tutors direct student dialog in online environments to keep it focused on the learning outcomes (Vegliante & Sannicandro, 2020). Finally, e-tutors

ensure there is sustained reflection among students by encouraging them to continuously participate in online discussions (Bustos-Contell et al., 2021).

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence in the CoI consist of three components (instructional design and organisation, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction) (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). These components of teaching presence serve two general functions (Garrison et al., 2000). The first function is the design of educational experiences. This function encapsulates activities performed in determining course content, designing learning activities as well as assessment protocols. The second function encapsulates all activities involved in the facilitation of learning in the course.

Teams of instructors and e-tutors are responsible for instruction in ODeL, particularly in high enrolment courses. E-tutors would then play a pedagogic role (Gómez-Rey et al., 2017) and complement the interventions of course instructors (Perrucci et al., 2020). Teaching presence in such contexts is a shared competence where e-tutors assume a role of facilitation of learning (Ntuli, 2016) in small groups (Mashile & Matoane, 2016). This entails interacting with students through discussions to achieve higher-order learning outcomes (Horner & Gouws, 2016; Shelton, Hung & Lowenthal, 2017). E-tutors actualise teaching presence in CMC through sharing short messages, providing guidance to students on essential learning activities, assessment of students' inputs, and modelling critical discourse (Garrison et al., 2000).

One of the key functions of e-tutors is to guide students in the content (Horner & Gouws, 2016; Ramorola, 2018) or direct students to focus on the process of content knowledge development (de Jong et al., 2018; Dzinotyweyi, 2015). They do this by providing an online engagement

opportunity for students within a group to construct knowledge within a social setting. Facilitating discussions online is a key role of e-tutors (Altmann, Langesee, Berger, Höflich & Matema, 2022). Online discussions constitute text-based digital records of concepts, plans, answers to questions and strategies that help students with meaningful processing of course-related information (Hung & Chou, 2015). According to Perrucci et al. (2020), online discussions help students reflect on their own perspectives, foster their own metacognitive skills, and strengthen their own critical thinking skills. Online discussions thus contribute to promoting knowledge building when e-tutors pose questions, provide hypotheses or link ideas expressed by students to other constructs.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study is based on the lived experiences of e-tutors appointed to conduct e-tutorials in a large ODeL institution in South Africa. These e-tutors are responsible to provide student support to small groups of students enrolled in the various courses of the university. Academic departments appoint e-tutors as experts in the discipline on a part-time, independent contract. Each e-tutor, depending on the size of the course, is allocated one or up to five groups of forty students each, on the learning management system (LMS). The university may appoint an e-tutor in more than one module only in exceptional circumstances. In each group, the e-tutor should provide social, pedagogical, managerial, and technical support to students (Matoane & Mashile, 2013). In executing the social role, e-tutors should develop sites on the LMS that are friendly and welcoming, ensuring there is a human touch to the course and to support discourse. The pedagogic role includes the facilitation of learning activities aimed at promoting active collaboration, construction and building of knowledge and testing of such knowledge through interaction with others. The management

and administration of the e-tutorial sites encapsulates the managerial role whereas the technical role includes support to students with ICT systems, software and tools used in the LMS.

According to Matoane and Mashile (2013), e-tutors in the institution operate within the context of the integrated tutor model (ITM) implemented for the first time in 2013. The ITM brings together various stakeholders in the institution to streamline the provision of e-tutoring. Recruitment of e-tutors is based on the procedures developed by the department of Human Resources whereas academic departments are responsible for appointments. E-tutors interact with the institutional department of ICT for gaining access to the LMS and the creation of small groups. Support staff in academic departments known as Academic Support Coordinators (ASCs) as well as instructors are responsible for the monitoring of the activities of e-tutors. There is an institutional department responsible for student support that coordinates ITM systems, processes, procedures, and tools necessary for successful tutoring. This department is also responsible, in collaboration with academic departments, for the professional development of e-tutors. E-tutors also interact with other sections of the university, for example the departments of Finance and the Library, should it become necessary.

Failure or less than adequate performance of any of the stakeholders in the ITM may impact e-tutoring negatively. To ensure a conducive educational experience for students, the institution should obtain knowledge of the efficacy of e-tutoring. To this end, the lived experiences of e-tutors could serve as valuable input. Given that e-tutors interact with the varied stakeholders to perform their duties, understanding their lived experiences is necessary for enhancement of teaching as well as student support within the university.

METHODOLOGY

The collection and analysis of data in this study followed a Hermeneutic Phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994). The Hermeneutic Phenomenological methodology helps focus the attention of the researcher on the lived experience of participants, thus providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Farrell, 2020) of e-tutoring from the perspective of e-tutors.

Focus group interviews are used in qualitative research and phenomenological research (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018) to gather rich data from participants within a particular social context (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). The researcher conducted face-to-face focus groups with e-tutors at regional centres of the university that were closest to them. Through a process of purposive sampling, e-tutors from different colleges of the university as well as novice and experienced e-tutors were included in the sample. Ten e-tutors with valid contracts made up a focus group. The sample consisted of six focus groups held in Polokwane (three), Durban (two), Cape Town (one). Semi-structured focus group interviews guided the discussions (Moustakas, 1994) that informed the research question of this study, namely: What are the lived experiences of e-tutors in supporting ODeL students? The focus group interviews were transcribed, and thematic data analysis followed. Thematic data analysis enables researchers to identify, analyse and report on themes within data (Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard & Smith, 2013). We used thematic coding for analysing e-tutors' lived experiences as well as the four roles specified in the ITM.

This study received ethical approval from the institution's research permissions committee. The researcher sought the permission of e-tutors to participate in focus group interviews, and they could withdraw at any time. The presentation of e-tutor responses is also anonymous. For example, in "Dbn2T10", the first three letters are the abbreviation for the regional centre, followed by the focus group number per regional centre

and "Txx" is the number of the e-tutor in the focus group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of all codes resulted in two overarching themes: e-tutor roles and non-academic constraints. Presentation of the results and discussion followed the CoI components.

Theme 1: E-tutor roles

The results of this study confirm literature findings that the activities of e-tutors in ODeL include technical, managerial, social, and pedagogical roles (Altmann et al., 2022). The results also indicate that the implementation of e-tutorials is not uniform across the institution and that e-tutors would like a platform to learn from peers in other faculties.

Teaching presence

In a systematic literature review study on teaching presence, ten Berge, Slot, Bijlsma, and Engels (2022) found that instructors were responsible for selecting instructional strategies for use in collaborative online discussions. In this study, however, e-tutors in a considerable number of courses selected instructional strategies for tutoring in their groups. In such courses, e-tutors would determine how to organise the interactions as well as the coverage of the content. These e-tutors thus assumed an instructional design role by producing mechanisms to foster discussions or an organisational role by structuring content in their e-tutoring sites. In this regard, e-tutors would focus on simplifying the content, using metaphors students could relate to, and reducing the cognitive load on students by making activities not too long or hard to tackle.

An unexpected finding in this study was activities of e-tutors focusing on direct instruction. Reference to direct instruction activities performed by e-tutors in this study arose in the context of endeavours to increasing student participation in e-tutoring.

The main activity here was the provision of additional learning resources on the LMS:

[W]hen I saw my numbers were not so good then I sent like many additional resources to motivate them to come (Dbn2T10)

When I used to send them like additional resources just for general reading, they used to come on site, and they were there (Dbn2T7)

E-tutors maintained that additional resources broadened students' perspectives, removed "blinkers," and presented materials in "everyday language" or in a "colourful" manner. However, not all instructors supported the posting of educational resources by e-tutors. Other e-tutors also viewed this practice with scepticism, arguing that the additional resources might introduce confusion among students, or the materials could be of inferior quality, or could increase students' workload.

With regards posting additional resources we got a message, we got an email ... saying we are not allowed to post anything unless the lecturer approves it first ... we now all take a step back, if lecturer needs to approve before we post it is a waste of our time, because how long will the process take before reaching our students? (Dbn1T1)

... there is a guide that the students use, there's prescribed text, there is recommended text so if you going to find additional material now there is that element that you may bring in material that is not very good (Dbn1T2)

The participants of this study indicated that facilitation of learning was the most significant role they played at the

institution. E-tutors therefore actualised teaching presence through facilitation of learning. This finding is similar to the reported role of e-tutoring in ODeL contexts (de Jong et al., 2018). E-tutors manage the online space so that it is conducive for effective learning (Joubert & Snyman, 2020). E-tutors in this study even provided support to students to pace themselves throughout the semester, ensuring that students particularly paid attention to assessment due dates and prepared for summative assessments, where applicable. Helping students to pace themselves during the teaching period is as an important student support initiative (Horner & Gouws, 2016) and is in line with the recommendation of a maximum of two weeks by Garrison et al. (2000), otherwise navigating the communication medium becomes cumbersome. Furthermore, Lim (2016) found that students who pace themselves are more successful.

Given the multifaced nature of facilitation of learning, e-tutors in this study viewed their role as daunting:

Even in residential university first year students are a nightmare. The ones who were spoon fed at school ... difficult to get their minds to shift to thinking. It is a function of the education system. That is part of the challenge we will face with e-tutoring because we assume knowledges that people do not necessarily have or the skills that they do not have ... (CT1T3)

The e-tutors in this study, who were involved with first-year modules, viewed students as having deficits.

... it also assist us to know the level that we must pitch the programme at, and also to know the pace, to know how far in the breakdown will we go, because the unfortunate part that we are in

is we do not know what the gap is in terms of knowledge ... we are already sliding on the assumption that says they are on this level therefore I am putting them on this boat and just driving the boat (CTIT4).

As a result of viewing students as having deficits, e-tutors in this study wanted students to seek for their help. E-tutors regarded students who were not seeking help as not participating. E-tutors in this study raised the participation rate of students as a cause for concern, irrespective of which topic was under discussion.

... it is because students are not active, and that is our main problem. We are trying to invent ways to get them interact with our discussions (Pol3T4)

E-tutors stated that students' context has an influence on the facilitation of learning. The frequency of interactions on the LMS was, for example, constrained by excessive data costs in the country. In addition, other students were not studying in their first language. Given these constraints, e-tutors viewed their facilitation of learning role as including "simplification" of constructs, making materials "accessible" to students, and helping with "academic writing."

... I also discovered they have an issue of reading their tutorial letters and things like that, so I started combining all these things ... and I will show them how to answer a question paper ... show them how to work with time management ... you need to be there every time ... (CTIT8)

Social presence

The e-tutors in this study provided direct interaction opportunities with groups of students through dedicated collaborative sites on the LMS. They claimed that student

participation rates increased in proportion to the levels of communication from e-tutors. They consequently increased their social presence by posting an increased number of attractive messages on the announcement tool of the LMS. Contrary to findings of Hülsmann and Shabalala (2016), where equivalent tutors made minimal postings, the announcement option was overused by other participants in this study, resulting in other course instructors placing restrictions on the number of announcements that could be posted by e-tutors. Persistent communication from the e-tutors was however frowned upon by others, who claimed it was a form of "nagging" students.

Other e-tutors in this study alluded to the constraining nature of an LMS regarding student interaction. E-tutors observed that students share their cell phone numbers on the LMS so that they can form groups on social media like WhatsApp. Students would then use the social media platforms to interact among themselves regarding course-related matters. Consequently, the nature and frequency of students' online interaction could be influenced by whether social media applications are accepted in the course or whether only LMS interactions are enforced. This finding is like that reported by Goold et al. (2010) where students posted social issues on separate dedicated social forums. Other studies also found that the preference of students to interact on social media reduces the demand for the social role on e-tutoring sites (Gómez-Rey et al., 2017; Hung & Chou, 2015). Participants in this study advocating for the use of social media for e-tutoring also point out that the push notifications available on these platforms would enhance their own experience as it will obviate the additional steps of having to constantly logon to the LMS. Participants in this study were of the view that the monitoring of e-tutor participation by only focusing on LMS activities is constraining

and not responsive to how students might prefer to communicate through social media.

Although most e-tutor-initiated interactions involved groups of students, e-tutors in this study occasionally sent private messages to specific students aimed mostly at personal motivation. One-on-one communication with students took place mostly at the onset of the teaching period with the purpose of introducing e-tutors to students. Although one-on-one communication is not scalable for other courses in a large ODeL institution, e-tutors in this study believed the benefits outweighed the heavy workload.

Participants in this study were not always successful in identifying students' needs, which would enable them to address their challenges: "To motivate students can be a bit difficult. In the sense that we need to look at what is missing from their side. We need to hear their views in each subject area, ... they have different needs" (Pol3T4). To this end e-tutors expressed the need to know the profile of students in their groups. Access to the profile of students in a group would help e-tutors know the level at which to peg discussions, the unique needs of students and whether all students have sufficient prior knowledge of the subject.

Participants in this study avers that the institution only values direct participation by students in e-tutoring. This contrasts with e-tutoring practices which acknowledge the principle of legitimate peripheral participation (lurking) (Dzinotyiweyi, 2015). Anderson's Equivalency Theorem (Anderson, 2003) postulates that it is not necessary to have all three forms of interactions (student-teacher; student-student; student-content) at an elevated level for a successful learning experience. In a study investigating lurkers in online learning and applying Anderson's theorem, Bozkurt, Koutropoulos, Singh and Honeychurch (2020) found that legitimate

peripheral participants were still meaningfully engaged in learning when student-content and student-interface interactions were high even though student-student and student-instructor interactions were low. E-tutors who supported lurking believed participation should not be limited only to counting the number of student posts since lurkers also benefit from e-tutoring. E-tutors used the statistics option of the LMS to show that lurkers visited other students' postings, additional resources, and other activities on the LMS. E-tutors in this study even made follow-ups with lurkers, asking them why they only viewed and did not post their own contributions on the e-tutoring platform. These students informed them that they were satisfied with what they gained and would contribute when they had unique issues to raise.

Cognitive presence

E-tutors in this study reported that they perform a number of administrative duties in order for them to create an environment that fosters cognitive presence. All issues identified by the respondents in this study relating to technical and management issues were categorised as the administrative role. The focus group discussions in this study revealed the inconsistent application of the ITM, which makes provision for e-tutoring at the institution. Whereas other e-tutors in this study highlighted what they regarded as good administrative encounters with the institution, a sizeable number of the e-tutors indicated challenges. Where applicable, the disjuncture materialised in a variety of administrative challenges reported by e-tutors, ranging from contracting, teaching, professional development, and payment.

The ITM requires e-tutors to set up the collaborative environment on the LMS. The reflections of the e-tutors highlighted that other configurations tend to elicit greater student participation which is necessary for triggering cognitive presence.

The Vital Cog of E-Tutorship

Sites organised around addressing historical problematic areas within a course, interactions regarding formative and summative assessment, providing non-text-based resources, and the like, tended to have high student participation.

E-tutors in this study spent considerable time initiating contact with students. As indicated earlier, this also included one-on-one contact outside the LMS. E-tutors also dealt with technical issues students faced: logging on to the collaborative sites or third-party sites, helping with the multiple tools used in a course, addressing students' struggles with unstable network connections and lack of familiarity with LMS options. The e-tutors in this study highlighted that navigating the institutional environment to solve these problems was a challenge. Similarly, de Jong et al. (2018) found the provision of technical support to students during synchronous online tutoring in a problem-based learning context tiring and disruptive. Also, e-tutors provide technical support (providing information on the work plan, addressing ICT issues, anticipating problems) (Jiménez et al., 2017).

Participants in this study had different experiences regarding e-tutor – faculty staff interactions. There were e-tutors who expressed feelings of satisfaction with the ASCs, describing them as “fine,” “professional,” “structured” or “very good.” These ASCs would interact often with e-tutors, drawing their attention to course instructors' communication and highlighting student inquiries that e-tutors did not respond to. These ASCs also provide e-tutors with tutor guideline documents from course instructors, ensuring role clarity in terms of teaching responsibilities within a course.

She is prompt on emails and on telephone, she also at the beginning of the semester tells us of our expectation and throughout

the semester they always communicate ... (Dbn2T7)

Other e-tutors, on the other hand, had limited interactions with the ASCs that focused on administrative matters (contracts, payments). Still other e-tutors evaluated communication with ASCs as non-existent or punitive:

I only get communication when I was unable to post for that 5 days and I only posted during the weekends that is when she sends an email saying that I did not participate (Pol1T5)

There are course instructors that have set up collaborative sites for interaction with their e-tutors. These sites improve instructor–e-tutor interaction and ensure that issues are addressed promptly: “On the e-tutor discussion forum they respond very quickly.” Where ASCs do not communicate course leaders' expectations well, or where they are mostly absent, the e-tutorial process is impacted negatively. In a study on the symbiosis between e-tutors and lecturers of an English Studies module at an ODeL institution, Shange (2021) highlights the importance of establishing clear expectations and communicating these adequately. Creating a stable communication environment is thus important for successful e-tutoring:

changing the coordinator disappoints me because you get to know one person suddenly, they change coordinator all the time ... It is important to have the same coordinator for a long time (Dbn1T10)

Other e-tutors in this study had a dim view of the provision of tools of the trade by the university. They had to buy the prescribed book using their own money and struggled to access resources from the library.

At the beginning when we started back in 2013, they said they will provide us with the prescribed textbook that never happened over the years every time the edition changes, I have been purchasing my textbook alone, there was a time when I requested it via the ASC (Dbn1T8).

E-tutors expressed frustration that even other students did not have access to important resources such as the prescribed textbook and that this impacted on students' learning.

I think the main problem with students, they just read the study guide and not the textbook. You must read your textbook and study guides in conjunction with each other (Dbn1T5)

Given the socioeconomic status of other students, e-tutors in this study felt it necessary to provide supporting materials that students could use should they fail to raise money to buy prescribed textbooks. Such interventions border on the role of course instructors as teachers and departs from the facilitation of learning role of e-tutors.

Theme 2: Non-academic constraints

The second set of e-tutor lived experiences in this study were categorised as non-academic constraints, ranging from expectations of e-tutors that were not congruent with their envisaged role, to contractual and payment issues. These issues emanate from the broader contextual higher education environment where this study was located and have potential to have an impact on the academic roles played by e-tutors.

Higher education institutions undergo renewal, and this could introduce structural as well as procedural changes, resulting in the use of short-term contracts,

increased external accountability and reductions in funding (Haresnape, Aiken & Wynn, 2020). The e-tutors in this study highlighted the constraining nature of the short-term contracts and their impact on providing a seamless student support environment. They indicated that the nature of the short-term contracts often resulted in delays of working with students immediately at the start of the teaching period. The e-tutors in this study were of the view that such late engagements with students impacted on student participation and perceptions of the tutorial process. Alternative suggestions from e-tutors regarding the seamless provision of online tutorials would unfortunately create further challenges for the institution in terms of compliance with labour regulations.

The commencement of duties by e-tutors in this study therefore occurred at different times, resulting in pro rata payments, which often resulted in perceptions of increased work without commensurate payment: "Right on the 10th of November you would get a pro-rata payment now if my student write on the 12th, I don't get payment" (Pol2T1). Engagement with the tutorial process under these circumstances was viewed by e-tutors in this study as constraining the efforts they would have liked to have made in their academic roles.

In the South African context, the non-permanent contracts of e-tutors, given the elevated levels of unemployment in the country, seemed to be counter-intuitive for other participants in this study. Other e-tutors in this study worked independently in their courses and these generated feelings of isolation. Other instructors in this study created collaborative sites for the sole purpose of sharing practices and solving issues among e-tutors and these were indicated as useful. This confirms the findings of Haresnape et al. (2020) who addressed feelings of isolation among e-tutors by forming communities that foster cohesion.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of e-tutors in a large ODeL institution in South Africa. The participants were responsible for e-tutoring in diverse courses and learning programmes of the institution. The participants regarded their role as a necessary element of student support in the ODeL institution. Although others encountered challenges with institutional processes and individuals, their concern for the well-being and academic achievement of students sustained their continual involvement with e-tutoring. The participants also expressed a desire that their involvement in e-tutoring should be worthwhile for the institution in as much as it is beneficial to them monetarily. To this end, the e-tutors in this study expressed concerns about the low level of participation of students in e-tutoring. The implication of these findings is that OdeL courses should be designed to optimize discourse and its consideration in assessment.

E-tutors in this study interacted with students through the various tools available in the LMS. Their role was to setup the LMS and provide interventions that would help students achieve learning outcomes. The participants maintained social presence on the LMS through a variety of motivational interventions that aimed at making the communication medium accessible without increasing cognitive load for students. The e-tutors indicated that students' social presence on the LMS as well as views of e-tutoring artefacts in the course from lurkers, correlated with the levels of communication they initiated.

The participants in this study fostered teaching presence through a number of strategies. To ensure student participation, they paid close attention to organizational issues such as how the content is presented, how additional resources are used to scaffold learning, and

how difficult concepts could be simplified to reduce the cognitive load on students. There are e-tutors in this study who performed direct instruction. This was as a response to student requests, particularly closer to the due dates of both formative and summative assessments. Participants of this study spent most of their time conducting facilitation of learning. There are course instructors who influenced how facilitation of learning is conducted whereas e-tutors in other courses had a free reign. The implication for higher education of this finding is that OdeL courses should be designed such that the teaching presence responsibilities of instructors and e-tutors are complementary and that such designs are implemented in all courses offering e-tutoring. The principle of equality of provision should therefore be embedded in courses offering e-tutoring so that all students, irrespective of socio-economic status, could benefit from the intervention.

The results of this study showed that the conditions necessary to foster cognitive presence were a limiting factor. First, other academic and support staff from the institution did not provide e-tutors with adequate support. Consequently, there were low levels of discourse in courses where institutional support was minimal. Second, participants in this study indicated that the low socioeconomic conditions of other students lowered their expectations for consistent critical inquiry from all students. Third, although participants noted the importance of critical inquiry to achieve higher-order learning outcomes, the low levels of participation from students impacted negatively on pursuits for this goal. It is therefore recommended that more research be conducted to focus on how to increase cognitive presence for all stakeholders involved in e-tutoring.

The literature review and lived experiences of participants in this study confirm the importance of e-tutoring in online learning. The benefits of e-tutoring however need to be extended to all students

and not only to those who can afford it or who have a propensity for participation in discourse. It is recommended therefore that ODeL institutions pay close attention to the need for broadening participation in e-tutorial programmes. Equality of educational provision is an important quality element for the provision of education and broadening student participation in e-tutorials, where it is provided, would attain this goal. A limitation of this study, however, is that the potential increase in student participation in e-tutorials was not investigated. Future research could thus investigate the impact of increased student participation on e-tutor lived experiences.

E-tutoring in this study is based on CMC. The participants in this study noted the limitations of the communication medium used in the institution and pondered whether social presence could be supplemented by using technologies external to the LMS that students tend to gravitate toward. It is therefore recommended that future research investigate the integration of technologies other than the LMS in mainstream e-tutoring programmes.

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