

# Students' Experiences of Tutor Support in an Online MBA Programme

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a recent study (Watland, 2007) that investigated students' experiences of tutor support in a Canadian University online executive MBA programme.

Despite the consensus of the importance of tutor support, current theory and research into tutor support has not emphasised the student's perspective, and in particular, the students' experience of this phenomenon has gone largely unexamined. To understand the under-researched area of the students' experiences of online tutor support the phenomenographic research approach was used, aiming to understand and describe qualitative differences in students' experiences of online tutor support.

Consistent with the phenomenographic approach, students' experiences of online tutor support were investigated through semi-structured individual interviews. Five distinctive categories of description of the students' described experience of tutor support were identified: uninvolved, confirming, elaborating, encouraging, and confrontational. These categories of description are logically related to each other from the least to the most dramatic awareness of online tutor support.

Implications for tutor support practice and further research on tutor support are also discussed.

## Keywords

Online tutor support, students' experiences, phenomenography

## Introduction

This study on students' experiences of tutor support — their experience of teaching — is important if we are to improve the quality of learning through a deeper understanding of online tutor support. As Ramsden (2003) suggests "... differences in the quality of learning are due to differences in the ways students go about learning; and these differences in turn can be explained in terms of their experience of teaching" (pp.19-20).

The importance of online tutor support is certainly not a new concept. In technology supported educational approaches these arguments include practical reasons, such as reduction of drop-out rates, theoretical reasons, such as mitigating student isolation, and moral reasons, such as the obligation to help students to succeed (for example, Lentell, 2003; Thorpe, 2002).

This importance is reflected in the value of researching online tutor support as argued by De Laat and Lally (2003) who write, "Unless we make rich links between tutoring and students' learning processes, it is difficult to fully understand and improve these processes" (p.12). However, as McCartan (2000) notes, "The number of postgraduate courses delivered by distance learning is increasing continually, yet there has been little research into the student experience of these courses" (p.181). Equally Alexander (2001) writes, "Much of the literature on e-learning is merely a description what the teacher could do or has done online, while the student experience of those activities goes largely undocumented" (p.241).

This discussion points to a largely unexamined aspect of our understanding of the phenomenon of online tutor support – we know little about students' thoughts, attitudes and perceptions regarding their experience of online tutor support. The aim of this study is to address this under-researched area.

Worth noting, tutor support is seen as intertwined with the interaction between tutor and student, and the tutor's pedagogical aim to influence the student's participation in learning activities (De Laat & Lally, 2003; Hodgson & Watland, 2004). In the study reported here, *online tutor support is defined as any interaction between student and tutor that influences the student's participation in learning activities.*

## Literature Review

The reviewed literature on online tutor support suggests a focus on understanding the phenomenon of online tutor support as an objective reality from the perspective of the tutor and to a much lesser extent the student.

From the tutor's perspective, this literature appears to focus on characterising the roles of online tutors and the online tutors' activities and interaction strategies. From the student's perspective, the literature appears to investigate the extent students' participation in online learning activities is influenced by the online tutor's interaction, the students' perceptions of online tutor support, and assessment.

A review of the literature revealed that a popular scheme in this literature has been to characterise tutors' "roles" or "presence" and ascribe skills and tasks for each of these roles (for example, Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, and Tickner, 2001). This literature suggests online tutoring as constituting "managerial, direct instruction, and social roles" (for example, Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer, 2001).

The literature also highlights that tutors, to support various tutor support pedagogical activities, engage in various forms of interaction with students in providing online tutor support (for example, Hiss, 2000; Kanuka, Collett, and Caswell, 2002; Topper, 2005). These various pedagogical activities and forms of interaction have been generally characterised as a set of process and methods in the form of "how to - best practices" that can be applied to a variety of syllabuses and pedagogical orientations, and how pedagogical activities and interaction with students associated with the tutors' "managerial, direct instruction, social" roles can be operationalized (for example, Barker, 2002; Bischoff, 2000).

The literature from the student's perspective revealed that a common area of investigation has focused on the influence of tutor support interaction on students' participation in online learning activities aiming to correlate students' participation in online learning activities with various tutor support interaction strategies. For example, students' critical thinking (Angeli, Valanides, and Bonk, 2003), engagement in argument (Painter, Coffin, and Hewings, 2003), quantity of students' participation (Mazzolini and Maddison, 2003), the nature of interaction (Vuorela and Nummenmaa, 2004), learner achievement (Jung, Choi, Lim, and Leem, 2002), tutor support satisfaction (Swan, 2002), and "lurking" (Beaudion, 2002).

Literature has also investigated the students' expectations of tutors and the support provide by tutors. It suggests students have individual learning needs, and that there is variation in the value students place on different tutor support, pedagogical approaches and interaction, as well as the nature and amount of tutor-student interaction (for example, Howland and Moore, 2002, Thomas, Jones, Packham, and Miller, 2004).

Lastly, literature on assessment suggests that assessment has a significant influence on the experience of students, and that teaching, learning and assessment are inextricably linked (for example, Hargreaves, 1997; Ramsden, 1997, 2003).

Yet what is not known from these five areas investigated in the reviewed literature is how and in what way students may experience tutor support. In particular, how and in what way students experience similar or different or any tutor support roles. If students awareness and experience of tutor support constitutes similar, different or any tutor support activities and interaction, or similar, different or any perceptions of tutor support activities and interaction, or different ideas of "effective online tutor support", or variation in their awareness of tutor support in interaction situations where their participation in this online learning activity is assessed.

## Context

The context of this study is a Canadian University (CU) online executive MBA programme that provides asynchronous text-based interaction between online tutors and students and is delivered almost entirely online. A typical course is eight weeks in duration and usually has eight lessons, one per week. Each cohort of students is divided into study groups for each course (sometimes referred to as learning sets) of between eight and 15 students from different work backgrounds.

At the time of this study, the students in CU's online MBA programme averaged nine years of management experience and their average age was 40. Of the student body, 29 per cent were women. Further, there were approximately 70 online tutors who reside in, or worked from, locations around the world. The online tutors typically hold higher education (PhD) degrees.

CU plans and pre-determines the curriculum of each course module (including any reference texts) and through pre-designed online course materials, how this is presented to students, and what is assessed by each course module assignments. The work of the online tutor is to grade the student's work and provide basic support to students as they learn and apply their knowledge through the "Ask the Tutor" database or other databases established for this purpose.

Each course module has three online tutor support interaction situations that provide the opportunity for online tutors to influence student's participation in these learning activities. These are:

1. Discussion Databases (sometimes referred to as bulletin boards or forums): A "reflective question" database where specific questions related to the course material are posted and students reflect, respond, comment or counter-respond on topics or comments from other students. The second database is designed for "case study" discussions. Students analyse and discuss case studies as a group.

It is important to note a significant design element of CU's MBA programme is that the students are assessed on their participation in the activities in each of these databases. This assessment component accounts for 20% of their overall course mark and they are required to obtain a grading of 60% or more in their participation in discussion databases to pass the course.

2. Marking of Assignments and Comments: A required activity in grading the student's performance. Students are also assessed on their participation in the activities in each of the two databases mentioned.

3. Individual Support: Individual students in need of specific help can use the open "Ask the Tutor" database, through one-to-one e-mails and by telephone if necessary.

## Research Approach

The phenomenographic research approach was used to investigate students' experiences of tutor support, with a further concern to understand and describe qualitative differences in students' experiences of online tutor support.

Phenomenography's aim is to describe the qualitatively different ways in which individuals describe their experience, interpretation, understanding, perception, and conceptualisation of distinctive aspects of a phenomenon, formulating a limited number of internally related, logically and often hierarchical categories that describe this variation (Marton and Booth, 1997).

Phenomenographic perspectives and assumptions can generally be described as an interpretative research approach, which is oriented towards individuals' experiences of the world. In phenomenography, this orientation is termed a "second order perspective", and is based on a relational epistemology and a non-dualistic ontology. The object of a phenomenographic study is not the individual who experiences a phenomena, nor is the phenomena, rather it is the variation of the qualitatively different ways in which individuals experience a phenomena.

Consistent with a phenomenographic approach, students' experiences of online tutor support were investigated with students using individual, open, semi-structured interviews for data collection; the aim of the interviews is to encourage the students to reflect on their experiences of online tutor support and to describe those experiences. Thirty-one students were interviewed by telephone, 16 female and 15 male. Students volunteered over a period of approximately one month. The sequence of the interviews related to when students volunteered and their availability to be interviewed. The interviews were analysed focusing on similarities and differences in the ways of experiencing online tutor support as described by the students 1) individually and 2) what all students describe, an iterative, hermeneutic process between both these contexts.

Relevant expressions were grouped and distinctive attributes were established in developing a limited number of internally related, descriptive categories, which are characterised in terms of variation in which online tutor support is experienced. Each category of description represents a way of experiencing the phenomenon of online tutor support for the group of students interviewed.

Differences between any two successive categories of description represent the distinctive variation of the dimensions (values) of the most distinctive, the most crucial structural aspects (in this study, student-tutor interaction) of tutor support. The logical order of the categories of description was derived from the complex of ways of experiencing online tutor support, and the differences between the categories of description represent distinctive differences of this complex. The relation between the categories of descriptions is graphically developed and termed the “outcome space”, the composition of students’ awareness.

As with all studies, this study has limitations. These limitations are seen as relating primarily to the research approach and methods of data collection and analysis. Specifically, 1) this research is context specific and whilst generalisability is not claimed, this is seen as limiting the results from this study at some level. 2) The interpretative nature of a phenomenographic study is such that the interpretation of the variation in the students’ described ways of experiencing online tutor support may not be the only possible interpretation and cannot be empirically proven. 3) The use of telephone for interviews exclusively rather than face-to-face is a deviation in the phenomenographic interview procedure used in previous phenomenographic studies and may be a limitation.

A further description of the phenomenographic approach and critiques is available elsewhere - for example, the phenomenographic approach, Marton, 1994 and Marton and Booth, 1997 – and critiques, for example, Richardson, 1999.

## Results

Five categories of description were identified and a logical relationship between these categories seemed evident where it appeared the students’ awareness of tutor support varied between no awareness to a dramatic awareness. These qualitatively different ways in which students experience online tutor support constitutes online tutor support from the student’s perspective and experience in this study.

Category A, “Online Tutor Support is seen as Uninvolved”, is interpreted as representing the most limited awareness of tutor support and tutor support interaction by students. Students used phrases such as “very much hands off”, “consistently very little input from the online tutors”, and “might jump in the odd time” when describing their non-interaction experience with tutors, suggesting the interaction between student and tutors reflected limited participation and actions by online tutors and little to no reciprocal events. An examples of students described experience included:

It’s hard to articulate but let me try. I think it’s like the student, like you’re a person in a boat who’s left adrift. You’ll find your way, you have the skills and you’ll find your way to the shore, but it would have been easier and you could have gained a lot more had somebody been telling you, “you know what, push to the right, or push with the left, that’s how you turn” and it would have worked better. (Olivia)

With Category B, “Online Tutor Support is seen as Confirming”, there is a higher awareness of tutor support, yet it is seen to be limited and more as confirming the students’ knowledge. Students used phrases such as “on the right track”, “what I did well” and “more like a validation” when describing their interaction experiences with tutors seen principally where a reciprocal event and action by the online tutors results from a reaction to explicit or implicit actions by the students. An example of students described experience included:

We had a couple of online tutors [say] “you’re off track” and it’s like well you know what, so if I’m off track, how do I get back on? (Jim)

In Category C, “Online Tutor Support is seen as Elaborating”, there seems to be more genuine interaction equality in participation between student and online tutor in terms of quantity, and similar to Category B,

reflects a dimension of variation of online tutor support interaction that is generally academic in nature. Students use phrases such as “totally participatory”, “created conversation”, providing “additional information from different readings” and “many examples”, when describing their interaction experiences with tutors where actions by the online tutor prompted further actions by the students resulting in a number of reciprocal events. An example of students described experience included:

Yea, and often he [the online tutor] would come in, and he would, um, try to explain, um, in a new way, areas, um, we were having trouble in. So the text explained it one way and then we did the exercises and if he saw that we were, some of us, or all of us were struggling, he would try and re-explain it, and come up with a way of explaining it somehow that maybe helped give us a better perspective on it. (Rachel)

In Category D, “Online Tutor Support is seen as Encouraging”, there seems to be heightened awareness of the personal and encouraging affective nature of tutor support interaction as becoming a major dimension in the students’ awareness and playing a significant part in defining the students’ experiences of online tutor support. In the previous ways of experiencing tutor support, students used a range of phrases such as “consistently very little input from the online tutors”, “more like a validation” and “totally participatory” when describing their interactions with tutors. In this way of experiencing online tutor support however, students use phrases such as “emails of encouragement”, “encourages us to ask questions”, “you’re doing fine”, and “encouraging people and setting a tone, a very friendly tone, and trying to relax people” in their descriptions of their interaction experience with tutors where reciprocal events and actions were initiated by the online tutors. An example of students described experience included:

The online tutor in the [names the course], he’s played a big role in encouraging people and setting a tone, a very friendly tone, and trying to relax people. I think initially most of us in this course are very apprehensive with the math and the numbers and everything and he did a lot to put us at ease I guess. (Holly)

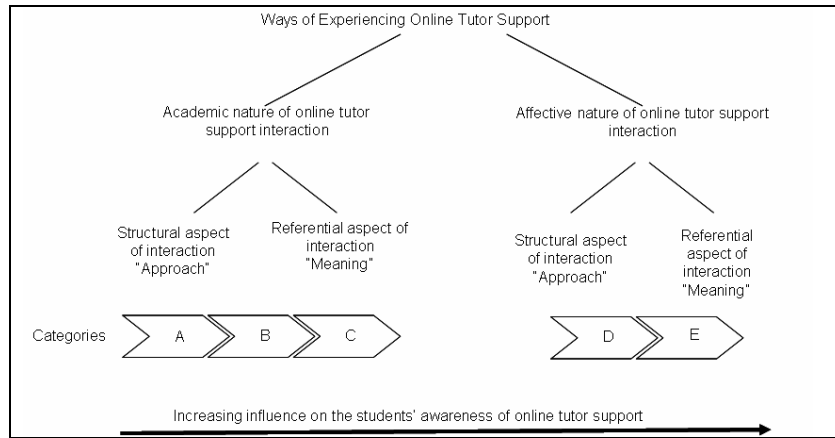
In Category E, “Online Tutor Support is seen as Confrontational”, the awareness of the affective nature of the interaction appears to be even more acute. Students use words such as “ineffective”, “mauled”, “offensive” and “detriment” when describing their interaction experiences with tutors, suggesting actions by the online tutor hindered further actions by the students resulting in limited reciprocal events. An example of students described experience included:

In my very first course, my [names the course] course, my online tutor, I found to be really ineffective at providing feedback – to the point that you were almost afraid to post because her responses would be public in the [discussion] database in terms of “there’s no value to this posting”, “don’t waste people’s time”. etc. And I don’t mean just directed at me, but at others as well. And in that regard, then what are you supposed to take away from that? Right? Other than you’re a little more hesitant to post something the next time. (Treyna)

Lastly, whilst other interaction situations described in the context section of this paper appear to differ depending on the Category of Description, in all Categories of Description, students consistently delimited their experience to Discussion Database interaction situations (the interaction situation where their participation is assessed) as one of the interaction situations related to that way of experiencing tutor support.

## **Outcome Space**

Drawing on the phenomenographic analytical structure used by Marton and Booth (1997), the inter-relations between these Categories of Description can be conceptualized diagrammatically as an outcome space of the qualitatively different ways of experiencing online tutor support as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Outcome Space of Online Tutor Support**

This diagrammatical representation depicts: 1) the aspect of online tutor support focused on in this study (interaction), 2) the relationship between the dimensions of variation of this aspect, and 3) the derived Categories of Description. In Categories A, B and C, the dimensions of the aspect of interaction seem to suggest online tutor support is academic in nature and has an increasing influence on the students' awareness of tutor support from Category A through to Category C. In Categories D and E, the aspect of interaction suggests online tutor support is more affective in nature and has an increasing influence on the students' awareness of tutor support from Category D to Category E.

## Discussion

Whilst the literature has characterised the roles of online tutors as constituting “managerial, direct instruction, social roles” what this study suggests is that students' awareness and experience of tutor support does not constitute tutor support roles *per se*. It may be helpful to consider online tutor support as practiced and researching online tutor support roles and competencies as relating less to the tasks of these roles and more to the awareness of tutor support.

The literature also suggests that tutors, to support various tutor support pedagogical activities, engage in various forms of interaction with students in providing online tutor support. What this study appears to imply is that the students experienced variation in awareness of certain tutor support pedagogical activities and interaction. Although low or high levels of awareness of tutor support are not characterised as either “good” or “bad”, students' need for online tutor support interventions may vary depending on students' prior knowledge and experience — and may not be necessary in all subject content. An implication for promoting higher levels of awareness of online tutor support is to recognise that students' vary in their ways of experiencing tutor support and tutors and studies researching online tutor support interaction may benefit by recognising this variation in terms of tutor's interaction with students and tutoring as “how to - best practices”, common to all syllabuses and pedagogical orientations.

The literature has also characterised the influence of online tutor support interaction on students' participation in online learning activities with limited consideration of the variation of actions and events of tutor support interaction, and how these dimensions of tutor support interaction interact with an increasing awareness of online tutor support and influence on students' participation in learning activities. What this study research suggests is that the students experienced tutor support as influencing their participation in online learning activities in certain ways; the students' awareness and experience of tutor support does seem to constitute tutor support in this way, although not as described in the literature. The students' variation of discerning and awareness of, and the relationships between dimensions of actions and events of tutor support interaction appears to interact closely with an increasing awareness of online tutor support and influence on students' participation in learning activities. Considering the students' variation of discerning and awareness of, and the relationships between dimensions of actions and events of tutor support interaction, may add to our understanding of pedagogical strategies and interaction of online tutors and provides new ideas and ways of thinking about the nature of tutors' interaction with students to support student awareness of tutor support and in turn tutors' pedagogical strategies.

Further, the literature investigated the student's expectations of tutor support aiming to understand what students expect from online tutor support. What this study suggests is that the students experience tutor support in a limited number of ways that reflects a range of awareness of tutor support interaction, which influences their participation in online learning activities in certain ways. This suggests alternative ways of thinking about students' perceived expectations and needs of tutor support, how students' conceptualise online tutor support, and provides a framework within which tutors (and students) can create new possibilities for thinking about, researching, and developing our understanding of tutor support as practised.

Lastly, literature on assessment suggests that assessment has a significant influence on the experience of students, and that teaching, learning and assessment are inextricably linked. What this research suggests is the students experienced variation in their awareness of tutor support more in interaction situations where their participation in this online learning activity was assessed. This may provide a structure within which tutors and programme designers can create new possibilities for thinking about, researching, and designing online learning programmes that aim to influence students' awareness and experiences of tutor support.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The results of the literature reviewed and the study reported in this paper suggest a number of directions for further research, particularly the following. 1) further qualitative research of the students' experiences of online tutor support is suggested generally and specifically in different and similar contexts. 2) further research that uses this second-order approach - focusing less on the phenomenon of online tutor support *per se* and more on the variation in students' experiences. 3) further studies on the use of telephone interviews and how this form of interviewing can be developed is seen as worthwhile. 4) each of the identified five ways of experiencing online tutor support is seen as warranting further detailed investigation.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study also highlights a number of considerations for educational practice worthy of consideration. 1) students appear to be encouraged in their studies through affective interaction which is seen as relating to the social presence of the online tutor whether this presence is managerial, instructional or social. 2) students' awareness of tutor support also appears to be influenced more by the affective nature of tutor support interaction than by the specific interaction situation. 3) confirming, elaborating and encouraging interaction is seen by students as supporting participation in learning activities rather than confrontational or uninvolved interaction. 4) the design of the online programme, particularly the assessment design, can have an influence on students awareness of tutor support. 5) online tutor support educational programmes that encourage online tutors, as well as those new to online tutor support, to consider online tutor support from the student's perspective are likely to be particularly valuable

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