

E-tutor Manual

Beat Lehmann, Kerry Dunne
University of New England



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Kerry Dunne (Project Manager), Beat Lehmann

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“Training is the key to success in implementing technology, but this is the budget that is often cut first. If teachers are not properly trained to use the technology it will be underused and ineffective” (Davies, 2008: 5).

Introduction

As Laurillard succinctly puts it in relation to online language tuition: ... in comparison with the march of innovative technology, the march of innovative pedagogy is hardly keeping pace (Laurillard 2003: IX). This short manual is therefore an important addition to the actual online curriculum project “Deutsch e-rklärt”, as the tutor is a key factor in the success of any online program in spite of the fact that most learning is done interacting with a computer and not a tutor. In Felix’ apt orchestra metaphor (Felix 2003: 7) of online language learning, the tutor acts as the conductor and thus has a role to play that goes far beyond the tasks of an administrator and stand-by for emergencies.

This manual focuses more on what Hubbard & Siskin (2004: 449) call tutorial CALL, where the computer is used in a tutorial role rather than purely as a tool. We also assume that the type of online course this manual is referring to focus on communicative and integrative rather than behaviourist methods of (language) learning (cf. Hubbard & Siskin 2004: 450ff.). The skills suggested are equally valid for both stand-alone online courses and blended or hybrid learning programs with an online component, and they should also be easily transferable to non-language subjects.

The role of the online tutor can therefore be characterised as a multi-task operation with roles including acting as an adviser, technical and emotive support person, organiser and traditional teacher (cf. Hauck & Stickler 2006: 465). This listing demonstrates how important, and at the same time pedagogically challenging, the role of the online tutor really is.

In talking about a typical online tuition scenario, there are a whole array of variables in the relationship triangle between tutor, learner and teaching material (which somewhat mirrors classic linguistic models of communication, cf. Jacobson, Ogden/Richards, Bühler etc. in Pelz 1994 27ff.):

- The overall personality of the tutor, his/her attitude towards teaching methods and CALL and his/her communicative behaviour all affect the actual implementation and success of the course (cf. Reinhardt & Nelson 2004: 202f.).

- The student body can range in age, gender and cultural/socio-economic background, with each combination requiring a slightly different pedagogical approach (cf. Towndrow (2004: 177f.)
- The exact role of the tutor and his/her work description in the context of the course would certainly vary according to the subject, the nature of the online teaching material and the quality of the material.

The following can therefore only be a kind of a “rough guide” to online tutoring which has to be adapted by the tutor according to the specific circumstances of the course. For the same reason this manual focuses more on communicative and pedagogical than directly technical skills, for which there is some very useful material available (cf. the online training guides listed in the bibliography or practically oriented articles about specific online learning tools like Hampel, Felix, Hauck & Coleman 2005 or Lewis 2006).

Within this framework the emphasis is on practice rather than theory, but the tutor still needs to further adapt our recommendations for the particulars of his/her specific teaching scenario.

To achieve a positive learning outcome in any kind of online course, various factors are involved, and the tutor plays a role in nearly all of them: In the following, the framework of our recommendations is formed by listing those factors in a sequential order. We concentrate on the tutors contribution within these areas of relevance in the hope that the course material has been created with all of them having already been taken into account in its design structure. A lot of the advice given is informed by on the experience of a number of UNE (University of New England, Armidale, Australia) language tutors, an institution that has a long and proud record of being at the forefront of distance learning and since the mid 1990s also CALL.

Creating Course Acceptability

Background:

Learner acceptability is, as Hémard (2003: 40) puts it: “... key to a successful interaction and integration... and it will ... only come into play if the design process is user centred and thus prioritises usability over functionality. ... Online CALL activities

must not only be useful and meet learners' needs but must also be sufficiently enjoyable to be accessed outside the classroom."

It also appears that the learners themselves have embraced CALL less than the enthusiastic creators and institutions, that run online courses, might believe (cf. Hagel & Shaw 2006: 283f.), which makes course acceptability even more important for a positive learning outcome.

Application:

Course acceptability is predominantly an issue in course design, but the tutor can also play a substantial part in making a course more user-centred and enjoyable. The awareness alone that this is, over and above all other pedagogical qualities of the course, the single most important factor in its success should help the tutor in paying special attention to his/her every day interactive style, tone of voice (literally and figuratively speaking) and general approach to giving guidance and advice. Light-heartedness, humour and a personable conversational style all contribute to the users' comfort and acceptability levels. Saturation levels in computer interaction have constantly risen over the last decade and have led to the situation that the user needs to be lured to go online regardless of achievement pressures (cf. Students and Information Technology 2008: 16). It is therefore even more important that the tutor has a pleasant and inviting style of interaction and discourse (cf. next chapter *Creating a Personal Space*).

An important factor in learner acceptability is the acceptance of the learning strategies offered by the course, which might not necessarily coincide with the preferred and previously adopted learning style of the individual (cf. Macaro 2006: 321, 330f.). It is the tutor's task to help build a bridge between the two divergent learning styles by explaining in very practical hands-on terms why the course does what it does. This can be done by going through the course before the start of the semester, identifying areas, which could be problematic or contentious for certain learners (for example the perceived lack of structured grammar in a more communicatively oriented part of the course) and thus offering for example a pre-emptive explanation of why the course has no grammar tables at this stage. The tutor should be equally vigilant during the course to pick up, correct and explain areas of

possible learner displeasure, especially if learner feedback shows that a good part of the student cohort find a course component unsatisfactory.

Creating a Personal Space

Background:

Online teaching programs are intrinsically anonymous in character in spite of attempts to create virtual characters, locations and situations in the programme itself. The learner is left in a social vacuum unless a personal rapport is established between the learner and the tutor and between the learner and his/her fellow learners (which will be the next point of discussion). Learning a language (our main communicative tool) within a learning environment with little or no real-time communication is a challenge. It is therefore not surprising that Hampel and Stickler list the development of an “own style” in communicating at the top of their skills pyramid for an online tutor (Hampel & Stickler 2005: 317; see Appendix I).

Application:

The course itself should encourage - if not discreetly compel - learners to have meaningful social and goal-oriented exchanges via discussion boards, group work, conferencing etc.

The tutor's role in this scenario is certainly not to be a main partner in these exchanges, but rather to encourage communication between course participants - the tutor therefore moves on what we could call a meta-level of interaction. It can't be stressed enough that it is **not the role of the tutor to make up for possible shortcomings of the online course in the area of interactivity with an increased tutor-learner exchange**. This would not only increase the workload of the tutor, it would also paper over the incongruities of the course itself. The tutor is there to monitor and encourage interactivity not to act as a surrogate learner.

Having said that, it is important that the tutor does not hide his/her personality. Prompted by the impersonal nature of the medium there could be a temptation to assume a neutral kind of personality, to become a voice from the void of cyberspace, maybe with the laudable intention of trying to be impartial, objective and matter of fact. This would, however, be highly counterproductive. In the same way that a

unique and real person is teaching in the classroom, the online tutor should reveal enough of his/her personality to become somebody the learners can relate to as “their” teacher/tutor (cf. Schweizer 1999: 7). This will lead to improved communication and identification with the course and the “course community” (see the next point of discussion). This mechanism shows up very clearly when residential or intensive schools are conducted in combination with otherwise exclusively online courses: the quality and quantity of communication both between learners and learners and tutor increases dramatically after the personal contact at the residential school. Suddenly a palpable sense of “family” can be felt in the exchanges and there is a clear increase in motivation, effort and achievement (cf. White 2003: 172). An online tutor can achieve a similar effect by becoming “real” and therefore somebody to “relate to” (without having to become overly warm and fuzzy). By posting more personal than purely goal-oriented messages like welcoming learners, thanking learners, making jokes or anything that shows up personal characteristics, a sense of familiarity can be achieved over time (Schweizer 1999: 7; cf. her detailed and useful practical advice in tutor behaviour on 69ff). This is the “facebook” part of the course and as important as any other aspect of teaching, as it will also encourage learners to communicate with and get to know each other. Putting a face to the voice is certainly recommended as an initial introduction (photos or even streaming a video) and advances in technology should be used to not only add to the communicative and integrative aspects of the course proper but also to bring the online tutor-learner relationship closer to a face-to-face teaching scenario.

In looking at it from the opposite angle, it is equally important that the tutor becomes familiar with the learners and their specific needs. This happens more or less automatically in a face-to-face teaching situation and is a big factor in good teaching practices, as the process of growing closer in the classroom through familiarity is a huge plus on every level of teaching. Even though the same level of closeness may not be achieved in an online teaching environment, any measure of personal rapport between learner and teacher helps in making the learner feel more comfortable, looked after and confident and thus enhances course acceptance, motivation and autonomy. At the same time it enables the tutor to cater for individual needs, tailor his/her teaching to the learner demographic, adjust his/her conversational style to

the individual and interact with a greater degree of understanding and empathy (White 2003: 110ff.).

Establishing a class profile is therefore an absolute must at the beginning of a course with privacy issues being incorporated through enabling learners to choose the amount of private information they want published (White 2003: 108). This is also highly relevant in the next point of discussion.

Creating a “lasting sense of community” (Felix 2003: 13)

Background:

“The skill of creating online communities or social entities for language learning” (Hampel & Stickler 2005: 316) has been largely neglected in the literature. Whereas it has long been recognized that a sense of community is vital for the success of face-to-face teaching in overcoming insecurity and language anxiety (Hampel & Stickler 2005: 317), the same is true for the online classroom. However, slightly different skills are required to create social cohesion online.

Application:

The necessity to create what we call “a personal space” is as important on the online class level as it is on the tutor level. Care should therefore be given, to offer plenty of opportunities for learners to disclose personal information in a safe and conducive environment. “Personalizing the distance classroom” (Schweizer 1999: 7) is definitely an area where shortcomings of the course can be overcome by initiatives of the tutor. If the course itself doesn’t include formalized learner introductions, the tutor should create playful avenues of getting learners to disclose personal information through discussion boards, additional learning games, student group formation etc.

Another more basic area of online socialization is the creation of an online “netiquette” (Hampel & Stickler 2005: 318), protocols of behaviour similar to keeping discipline in the face-to-face classroom (a list of concrete examples of different skills is given in Hampel & Stickler 2005: 319).

The creation of a similar sense of belonging that develops over time in a healthy classroom can start at the very basic level of graphics and presentation. The course specific original look of a homepage with, for example, clip-art logos used as icons,

and any other visually appealing unique and consistent design elements of a particular course (the graphics of *Deutsch e-rklärt* could well serve as an example) create familiarity, familiarity in turn leads to identification, identification with the course (and therefore implicitly with the other course takers) creates a sense of community, and an on-going sense of community does wonders to motivation and fosters group learning (cf. Godwin-Jones 2003: 47). The tutor can have a decisive input on every level of this process, if the importance of socialisation for a positive learning outcome is sufficiently recognized. It should be pointed out in this context how prevalent and powerful group-specific, symbolic representations are in all sectors of public life - and why can't the "cool" looks of an online programme do to the learner what a Manchester United shirt does to the soccer fan? The tutor doesn't necessarily have to create a fan club or a 'Dead Poets Society', but a personalized style on every level of interaction from graphics to guidance will help in fostering a lasting sense of community.

Creating Collaborative Projects and Assisting in Small Group Interaction

Background:

Direct learner interaction is becoming more and more available through audio and videoconferencing: as broadband access is rapidly becoming the norm so will these forms of direct synchronous communication. An excellent overview of the advantages, drawbacks and challenges of these new online teaching tools can be found in Hampel & Stickler 2005. In terms of the new skills required to assist learners in the use of these new technologies Hampel & Stickler (2005: 316ff.) point out that, apart from their technological application, the tutor also needs to know strategies to ensure that these new forms of interaction are socially based and help to create communities.

Application:

Small group interaction can fulfil a variety of functions. Apart from the obvious communicative and collaborative approach to learning, it creates a sense of belonging, it motivates, learning becomes more fun and all sorts of technical and study-related issues can be dealt with by asking group members rather than

approaching the tutor (a substantial time-saving measure; cf. Mangenot & Nissen 2006: 614). Making sure that learners learn in groups and have regular meaningful exchanges is therefore perhaps the single most important stratagem in online tutoring. Nothing can bring CALL closer to face-to-face teaching with all its advantages than establishing well functioning learning groups. This is again mainly the responsibility of the course designers, but even if there are good structures in place for fostering group learning, the tutor's role in making sure that it actually happens is vital, especially at the beginning of the course. One of the first actions of the tutor should therefore be to combine learner introductions with the formation of study groups. How exactly that is done will naturally differ from course to course, but the tutor's role is vital initially in making sure that the groups are formed and functional. Whereas there may be less opportunities for direct communication online than in a face-to face class, the huge advantage of online learning is that learners can socialise from home, overcoming the logistical problems of having to arrange meetings in real space. Additionally, shy or less confident learners can claim an equal share of time and class 'space'. This is often overlooked when comparing online with face-to-face teaching, as - with a trend towards flexible learning - socialising outside of the classroom has become more and more difficult in the internal learning modes. It might be a good idea to make learners aware of the great chance to thus meet people online and in their own time who they would never be able to meet in real space.

Schweizer (1999: 55f) distinguishes between three forms of groups:

'Base groups' of ideally 5 heterogenous (gender, age etc.) learners that stay and work together for the duration of the course (they could be geographically close to facilitate possible off-line interactions). Different roles could be assigned to these learners (eg. technical support person, "recorder", "facilitator").

Temporarily established **'formal groups'** which consist of only two or three learners with the purpose of completing a clearly defined task. They could be self-selected or grouped by the tutor according to task-specific criteria (possibly again given different roles within the project).

'Informal groups' of two to three learners for the completion of small tasks relating to specific course elements.

The base groups are obviously the most important ones, and these should be formed in every online course regardless of the subject matter. There are various means of creating a group identity, but essentially the groups should be known and identifiable by all other groups to create playfully competitive scenarios, group collaboration and group differentiation (eg in a webquest for compiling a dossier on the European of the year, groups could be identified as “die Berliner, die Pariser, die Londoner” (The Berliners, Parisiens, Londoners)).

Creating Motivation

Background:

Curtin (1994: 259f.) pointed out in the early stages of CALL that learner attitudes contribute greatly to learner success and that positive motivating factors include the acceptance and identification with the learning program as well as the medium (in this case the online delivery) and the teacher (in this case the online tutor). Creating a positive attitude is therefore important not only in terms of motivating learners to learn the language, but also to embrace the learning program, its delivery and ‘deliverers’. It is therefore paramount that all of the online tutor’s main functions (teaching, giving technical advice, troubleshooting and reception of learner criticism) are done with a constructive, positive and motivating attitude.

Application:

Let’s take the example of a quiz that malfunctions because a correct answer was counted wrong due to not having been included in the set-up. It would be understandable but highly counterproductive if the tutor were to side with the complaining learner in moaning or excessively apologizing about the inadequacy of the quiz software. Rather, the learner should be thanked for helping to improve the quiz, and the advantages of the quiz (self-correction) should be pointed out. This could be accompanied by a general message to all learners pointing out the quiz’ structure, why it’s used by the course and how it can be improved by the learners, quoting the positive contribution made by the learner who detected the mistake. In this way the complaining learner doesn’t only feel vindicated but also praised for taking responsibility, and all other learners will be encouraged to participate and to get themselves involved. Here, as everywhere else, the devil lies in the detail or rather

the subtleties of tutor-learner interaction: Instead of cementing an initial negative attitude by the learner, the positive way this problem was dealt with resulted in the creation of more motivation and learner autonomy. Also, a lot of time was saved as further problems of this nature can now be dealt with without fuss and lengthy explanations on both sides.

Learners usually start an online course highly motivated but then may lose their motivation along the way through a whole array of factors including isolation, loneliness, competing commitments and the absence of structuring aspects of face-to-face teaching (White 2003: 115). That means that the tutor has a good basis to start with and 'only' needs to maintain motivation rather than having to create it. However, the above list also shows that a lot of the factors involved in losing motivation are both online specific and affective. Extra care needs to be taken therefore to create a climate of empathy and encouragement both between learner and tutor and among the student body (White 2003: 116). This gives the measures for personalizing the online classroom an additional dimension and extra importance.

Regular and motivating teacher-learner interaction also helps in creating the necessary support structures for the learner to adjust to a mostly new learning environment and was regarded as more important than the appeal of the state-of-the-art delivery in a study about teacher directed learning (Barty 1999:31). The tutor thus shoulders an enormous responsibility, especially since he/she is normally dealing with a large student body (one can assume that an online classroom is usually much larger than a face-to-face classroom). The tutor therefore has to develop the ability to address the whole student body in a way that the individual learner feels personally spoken to and looked after (cf. Creating a Personal Space).

Motivation can be achieved by what was suggested in all the areas of tutor input addressed so far, but perhaps the most important contributor is the creation of learner autonomy.

Creating Learner Autonomy

Background:

Learner autonomy, or what we could call "strategic competence involving the use of appropriate learning strategies" (Hurd 2000: 61), has been identified as being a

prerogative of modern language learning especially on a tertiary level. Whereas the main bulk of responsibility in creating autonomy lies with the teaching program itself, the tutor can certainly contribute in the way he/she gives advice, solves problems and generally communicates with learners. Online learning is generally more self-directed than face-to-face learning and presents new challenges in taking responsibility with numerous decisions having to be made by the learner instead of the classroom teacher (White 2003: 150). This requires a double-handed approach in, on the one hand, setting up clear and attractive learning structures and, on the other hand, fostering learner autonomy. The fact that more learner autonomy is required in online teaching unfortunately doesn't mean that the flexible or distance learning mode per se gives rise to learner autonomy, so self-directed learning has to be supported not only on an individual level but also through fostering collaborative decision-making in what and how to learn (White 2003: 150ff.).

Application:

First of all, the tutor should be aware of the course elements, which require learner autonomy, and then develop specific ways to encourage learners to learn more autonomously. Whereas the development of learning strategies is necessary even in drills, quizzes or similar more automated exercises, strategies for autonomous learning are essential in the more creative areas of learning where the individual initiative of the learner comes to the fore. However, it is often exactly in the areas, where autonomous learning can be fostered and taught, that personal initiative is needed to get started in the first place. Thus to give a positive spin to what easily could become a vicious cycle, often requires intervention from the tutor. Kick-starting autonomous learning can come in various forms. In *Deutsch e-rklärt*, for example, there is a segment called "live and learn", a games section, which both fosters but also requires personal initiative in order to work. Once the tutor is aware of this, he/she can intervene and help the less autonomous learners to overcome the first hurdle of inertia by encouraging, motivating and prodding them to become active learners. The tutor could, for example, suggest that the learners should first try a particular (and particularly suitable) game, in the hope that they will get a positive experience and thus a taste for more. Or he/she could ask for feedback about this particular segment,

and then relate certain issues raised by individuals to the whole student body. Or a particular game could lend itself as a good way to form small learning groups and thus achieve a double result. However, it has to be noted that not all learners are willing to become autonomous learners (very often people who are unused or unwilling to self-direct in other areas of their life; cf. Hurd 2000: 78) and that it might thus be counterproductive to force them into a role they can't cope with. The tutor should be aware that he/she is dealing with individuals who might not only prefer different learning styles, but who might also be more or less suited for learning autonomously (cf. Vanijdee 2003: 81ff.). A degree of flexibility and choice in learning tasks and even in assignments is therefore appropriate, and any attempt of the tutor to prod and push people into doing something they might not normally do themselves needs to bear that in mind and be gentle.

Creating scaffolded advice structures (Towndrow 2004:176) is another way of encouraging learner autonomy. In other words, the learner should be helped in developing strategies to help themselves rather than having solutions thrown into their laps, which can easily lead to a kind of tutor dependency with more and more cries for help from the learner over time.

Creating Clarity, Simplicity and Ease of Navigation

Background:

No matter how well structured and set up the online program is, there will always be a need for additional support by the tutor. Learners often need to be encouraged to go online no matter how attractive or relevant the online content is (cf. Wagener 2006: 286). There will be technical glitches that cannot be predicted, the learners will need guidance in a number of ways, study groups will have to be formed etc. (cf. pyramid skills for online tutors in Hampel & Stickler 2005: 317; see Appendix I) – and the way that is done obviously impacts strongly on the success of the online program.

Application:

Recommending to tutors that they thoroughly familiarise themselves with the course may sound extremely trivial, but often there is not enough time (or time taken) to do that before the start of the semester. However, pre-empting possible teaching issues

by identifying problem areas beforehand is a very good investment in time. It is also often overlooked that in doing so one has to identify with the learner rather than looking at it from an instructor's point of view. It can be extremely instructive to actually do a similar online course in a language that's completely unknown to the tutor. It might be an unforgettable eye-opener in finding out what a learner actually goes through when starting not only a new language but doing it in an unfamiliar learning environment.

By thus carefully working through the course initially, the tutor can establish a checklist of ongoing tasks and then supplement the list by further tasks that come up in the course of the semester. The tutor should be especially vigilant in making sure that the course itself provides enough guidance for learners in knowing exactly what they have to do, above all in areas where autonomous learning is expected. As Lamy & Hassan (2003: 54) point out: "It showed that distance learners cannot easily be persuaded to undertake either solo or interactive reflective work if task presentation is not completely explicit in its expectations that they do so".

Once this process has been gone through it only needs to be adjusted, fine-tuned and improved in the following semesters and thus can save a lot of time in the long run.

It is interesting to note in this context that everything that comes in simple text form seems to be preferred in a hard-copy format over online delivery (cf. Shaw 2006: 298). The learners might therefore be somewhat reluctant to read through online course instructions that are purely text-based, and thus any enhancements by computer-specific media such as vodcasts or podcasts might substantially increase the attractiveness of text-based instruction material. Even though that is more a design issue it will also become relevant in tutor course input.

It is also advisable to create different information vessels instead of pouring every kind of announcement into the same pot. The information should be structured according to levels of importance and thematic criteria so that advice relating to grammar, upcoming events like residential or intensive schools, additional instructions for assignments etc. are all in different and clearly and attractively marked locations. The pop-up announcement window in a Learning Management System like 'Blackboard', for example, may not be the best way of disseminating information and should be partly replaced by icons that can be directly accessed from

the course content homepage. There needs to be, for example, a specific window for urgent messages that everybody has to read and regularly check. In setting up these structures it is highly advisable to get feedback about their relative clarity beforehand by letting somebody navigate them, who is not very computer savvy and has no pre-knowledge about the set-up of the course. And it should never be forgotten that the 'look' (especially visual tags) greatly contribute to successfully reaching learners and add clarity in navigation (cf. Schweizer 199: 91).

Creating Space for Meaningful Learner Feedback

Background:

Generally speaking "...little is known, still, about users' perceptions and behaviours when interacting with online learning environments, reinforcing the dichotomy between designers and users' perception of how web-based environments ought to work." (Hémard 2006: 262). The role of the tutor as an intermediary between learner and course becomes therefore even more important in all aspects of learning. A big part of that is listening to what the learners have to say and to invite learners to give feedback. It should not be forgotten that the teacher-learner relationship in an online environment is substantially different from the one learners are used to from their face-to-face teaching experiences (White 2003: 98), and that the necessary adjustments can cause anxieties, frustrations and undermine their confidence. If that is coupled with the personally challenging experience of learning a foreign language for the first time, the learner will need genuine support and a feeling of being listened to and catered if not indeed cared for (cf. Hurd 2003a/2003b).

Application:

Maybe the most important factor in the quality and quantity of feedback given by learners is the willingness of the tutor to listen, to receive and to embrace criticism. This is likely to shine through on a very subtle level of communication rather than just being prompted by explicit encouragement. The tutor can ask for feedback, but still will not receive it, if he/she employs a defensive or unreceptive stance in reacting to it.

Learner feedback should be collected and evaluated, to improve the course in the long

run and in collaboration with the course designers (and even technology designers; cf. Hauck & Stickler 2006: 465). In this process the learners should not only serve as a critical audience, but should also be informed as much as possible about the consequences and therefore their contribution in terms of course improvement. This is an additional stratagem in encouraging learner autonomy and motivation. Taking learner input seriously on all levels of communication and learner-tutor interaction, plays a main role in creating all the positive elements of tutoring listed in this manual. Needless to say that this has to be a genuine and not just a strategic commitment. A very obvious but often neglected virtue is the immediacy of response. It should become an automatic habit for the tutor to respond to learner queries immediately. Since they have to be dealt with at some stage anyway, this is purely a matter of good habit forming, a habit, however, which could make a huge difference in the way the learner feels in terms of being taken seriously, looked after and ultimately of being motivated. In regard to the volume of learner queries it should be pointed out that having base groups will ensure that some of the questions and issues are resolved there.

As far as structuring learner feedback is concerned, the tutor has to be aware that individual thresholds of speaking out, lethargy levels, time constraints etc. vary greatly between learners and that they might only receive feedback from certain personality types (good learners, for example, are often more confident communicators and therefore tend to be more responsive in giving feedback). That, of course, can invalidate the conclusions drawn from learner input and also mean that only a section of learners are ultimately catered for. It might therefore be necessary to build in some forms of very easy to do but compulsory feedback and to employ simple questionnaire techniques. A good idea might be to portion them out and add a few questions to the end of each assignment. Ideally this is already done on the course design level, but only the tutor can really find out over time, whether enough meaningful feedback is received from learners and then react by putting the necessary corrective measures in place.

On more advanced levels of language learning it might be a good idea to conduct the tutor-learner exchanges in the target language with various benefits arising like more spontaneous, expressive and personalized language use and greater motivation,

participation and authenticity (Absalom & Marden 2004: 423).

What we call 'feedback' of course also runs in the direction course/tutor to learner in a whole range of applications from the mostly automated responses given to learners for evaluating more mechanical learning tasks up to the more personalized feedback given by the tutor in response to creative tasks like written or oral presentations.

These types of feedback are mostly incorporated into the course design proper and therefore of less importance for tutoring in the context of this manual (cf. for example studies by Bangs 2003, Heift 2004, Tsutsui 2004). However, as Felix suggests, there could be ways of providing the learner with more personalized feedback even in the more automated forms of task assessment (Felix 2003: 150ff.). For the different forms of personalized feedback given by the tutor the same recommendations apply as mentioned in this manual for all forms of learner-tutor interaction.

Creating “feedback loops” (Felix 2003: 14) between Tutors

Background:

There is no question that ongoing feedback from learners is vital for the development and monitoring of CALL (cf. Maroulis & Reushle (2005: 7), but the importance of feedback loops between tutors might be a lot less obvious. However, a continuous exchange between tutors is not only generally stimulating, but can greatly help in avoiding mistakes, in the sharing of successful strategies, exchange of experiences and, last but not least, it can lighten the burden of responsibility, especially if the tutor is running a course on his/her own. This manual itself is based on tutor feedback loops, as many of its recommendations are the result of exchanges between various UNE online tutors.

Creating open lines of communication between tutors is also one of the major tasks of the program director. Apart from being responsible for equal standards in marking and other more traditional tasks, they should apply the same principles of director-tutor communication as is proposed here for tutor-learner interaction: a personalized style, encouraging a sense of community among tutors, immediate feedback, fostering tutor motivation and autonomy and last but no least ensuring program acceptability among tutors. The more enjoyable, motivating and satisfying the running of the course can be made for the tutor the more enjoyable, motivating and satisfying the

course itself will ultimately be for the student. As mentioned before, course design and program supervision should really incorporate and form the basis of all the recommendations listed in this manual (for a list of technical skills a program director should ensure tutors have see Appendix II).

Application:

In the same way that learners should become autonomous and pro-active in approaching their learning, tutors should take the initiative in approaching other online tutors, even if it means contacting “the competition” at other universities. A lot of the really nitty-gritty every-day experiences of an online tutor doesn’t find its way into the literature (or only in abstracted form), and it’s exactly on this mundane level of daily activity that the tutor is most likely to encounter difficulties. Needless to say, a regular exchange with colleagues can bear other co-operative fruit as well. To feel left alone in the face of often new technologies and new pedagogical challenges can be very disheartening and lead to a negative attitude towards the online teaching program, method and/or technology, and this negativity will inevitably leak into the communication with the learners.

It is also highly recommended to engage in reflective practice and write a teaching journal in order to preserve experiences and reflections for one’s own reference or for the exchange with colleagues and to thus raise the level of awareness in what is going on in the online classroom (cf. Towndrow 2004: 174; Lewis 2006: 590). Journal writing and exchanges with other tutors can greatly enhance what could be called “teacher autonomy”, the ability to develop the necessary skill base for online teaching ‘on the run’ (cf. Lewis 2006: 588).

Creating Efficiency

Background:

Most of the points dealt with so far, dovetail with each other, and none so clearly as in the case of achieving efficiency. Time constraints will inevitably limit the number of suggestions that can be put into practice, so it is very important to factor that in and combine doing more with being more efficient. Here therefore a few suggestions for saving time, some of which have already been touched upon.

Application:

- If relevant enough for other learners, the complaint/question/contribution of a learner should be published to the whole student body in order to pre-empt similar enquiries, to create a sense of community and to motivate learners by the positive example of other learners' participation.
- On the other hand, base groups should be encouraged to solve problems by always asking each other first before approaching the tutor. This pattern of behaviour needs to be established right from the start, as is the case with all other patterns of desired habitual learner behaviour.
- Scaffolded advice leads to more learner autonomy and to less tutor dependency in the long run and is therefore also a timesaving measure.
- Generally speaking, an investment of time before the course saves time during the course as already pointed out in various contexts.
- It is important to become aware of the efficiency of certain types of interactions and react accordingly. The UNE online German course, for example, introduced a weekly consultation hour where learners were given the opportunity to ask all sorts of questions about course content and course structure. It turned out that only a handful and always the same learners used the service and that not much was achieved measured against the time put in by the tutor. The hour was subsequently abolished and questions answered by means of the discussion board, a more efficient way, as all learners had access to the answers and at all time.
- The correlation between amount of direct feedback given and learning success seems inconclusive in direct chat at least (cf. Loewen and Erlam 2006: 2ff.), which might be an indication that, generally speaking, quantity in feedback doesn't necessarily lead to quality of learning. It is prudent to assume that the more information the tutor puts up on discussion boards, the announcement windows, the homepage etc. the less likely it is given attention and read by the learners. A 'garrulous' interactive style could therefore easily be counterproductive and force the tutor to neglect more efficient areas of interaction. The combination of being succinct **and** warm and personable is the ideal recipe for communicative efficiency.

Economy in interaction by realistically judging what is possible to achieve on both the part of the tutor and the learner, prioritising accordingly and thus creating efficiency is a win-win scenario for everybody involved in the learning process. It should therefore be part of what is reflected on in the tutor's journal, it should be evaluated at the end of a course and it should be a topic in tutor feedback-loops.

Creating Realistic Expectations

Background:

Because online tutors often work with relatively untried or completely new teaching materials, methods and technologies, or may themselves be new to the job, it is highly probable that a certain amount of stress develops from not knowing what to expect, both in terms of teaching success, program success/failure and learner acceptance. Both, overly positive or negative expectations, can lead to a negative attitude towards online teaching in general or the course in particular. It is therefore important that the tutor develops a certain amount of equanimity and light-heartedness around his/her expectations. Tutor feedback-loops will certainly help, but there are a few other strategies that can be developed.

Application:

Users will more often know "... what they do not want rather than formulate precisely what their needs might be ... and learners needs are therefore ... often perceived through a reaction against or even their rejection of the interface they were interacting with" (Hemard 2003: 29). The tutor therefore has to be prepared to be at the end of a considerable amount of criticism and take it in his/her stride. Rather than getting drawn into a defensive stance in dealing with rejection of the interface, there needs to be a constructive use of scaffolding techniques to bring the learner closer to the acceptance and understanding of the online materials and methods through his/her own initiative and participation.

Where there are real shortcomings in an online programme the tutor should take pre-emptive measures as well as explain rather than hide the latter. But there will always be surprises that can affect a tutor negatively. Towndrow (2004: 177ff.), for example, mentions a pattern of puzzling one-way communication that developed between

himself and Chinese online learners, which turned out to be a reflection of culturally different communicative behaviour rather than a negative reflection on his teaching. But until he found out he was greatly affected by what he perceived as his own shortcomings in dealing with the situation.

The relatively high attrition rate common to online courses (White 2003: 173; Hampel & Baber 2003: 186) could also be dispiriting and be taken as the result of personal failure. A good way of dealing with this might be to set up a special vessel for learners to talk about this issue right at the start of the course, so that the tutor will get a better insight as to the causes of learner drop-out over the course of the semester and be able to better help them in their predicament (and before they actually leave the course). A special (and private) place to go to, such as the forums called “Kaffeeklatsch” and “Chinese Teahouse” set up for students of German and Chinese at UNE, will encourage learners to voice their issues early on. It can include learners from within the course or across several courses. Forums like these are especially important as learners with low self-esteem, low confidence and limited learner autonomy are both more likely to drop out and less likely to talk or be proactive about it (cf. Ng, Yeung & Yuk Hung Hon 2006: 227f.). If appropriate, the tutor can then disseminate issues in a generalised form among the whole student cohort.

Outlook

Felix (2003: 15) writes that: “... online learning will [not] ever replace face-to face learning and there is no suggestion that learning a language entirely online could ever be seen as ideal”. There is, however, a growing number of stand-alone online language courses, and blended or hybrid models of course delivery are increasingly prevalent, so that the role of the online tutor becomes ever more important. This doesn’t necessarily correlate with the amount of tutor training available, especially in its really mundane, concrete and practical application. It is hard to cover these areas with scientific research, as a lot of advice that could be given is necessarily based on impressions, one-off events, informal evidence, and, generally speaking, on experiences that can’t be quantitatively measured. Regarded as scientifically inconclusive they are not likely to be published in journals. However, it is exactly that

kind of advice that the tutor will most likely be seeking, especially if there is a degree of isolation involved. The creation of a website is therefore strongly suggested (cf. more formal organizations listed by Hauck & Stickler 2006: 473) where online tutors can both advise and receive advice on a relatively informal basis, much like the feedback given about commercial products on the internet, where questions can be raised and then answered by several people and the exchange later listed under structured headings. This is even more important as technological advances are often ahead of the literature giving teaching advice about them and the best written articles can become more or less obsolete or have to be updated within just a few years (cf. Hampel & Baber 2003, Hampel, Felix, Hauck, Coleman 2005, Hampel 2006).

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Web-based resources:

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<http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1573>

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<http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1315>

Training sites for using online technology:

<http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com/>

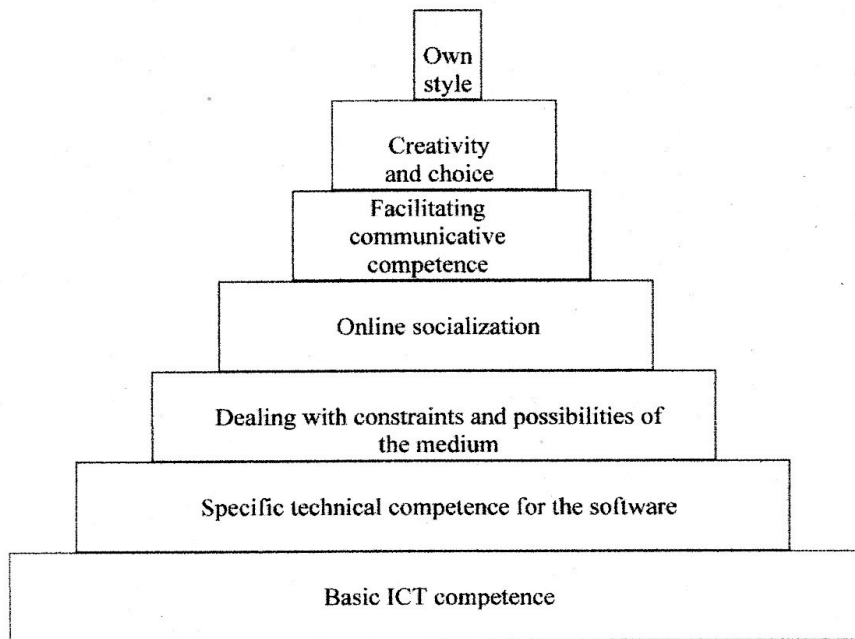
<http://www.multimediatrainingvideos.com/>

<http://www.click-lounge.eu/en/> (upcoming course in 2009)

There are also subject-specific free online resources available like the ones offered for example by the American Association of German Teachers:

<http://www.aatg.org/content/view/239/41/>

Appendix I: Tutor Skills Pyramid (Hampel & Stickler 2005: 317)



Appendix II: Checklist of Basic Technical Skills for an Online Tutor

- Basic computer skills like word processing, emailing, working with the Internet.
- More advanced computer skills like creating PowerPoint presentations, working with audio software (eg Audacity, iTunes) and graphic software (eg Photoshop) as far as relevant for the specific course.
- Thorough familiarity with the educational software used (eg Blackboard).
- Familiarity with other course specific or custom-made software (eg conferencing software).
- Close contact and collaboration with institutional computer department staff to ask for technical advice and improve course design.