Chapter 77
Tutors' Perspectives on Online Facilitation of ESL Courses in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Online facilitation in distance education presents many challenges that involve both the learners and instructors. Through these challenges, the roles tutors' play and their best practices used in online facilitation should be looked into to improve the distance-learning experience. In view of this, this chapter attempted to examine the perspectives of experienced tutors engaged in the university's virtual learning environment, WawasanLearn. Based on the interview findings of eight tutors, several emergent findings highlighted the roles and challenges of effective online facilitation. As this research is based on the guidelines of the prominent Salmon's model, the findings also highlighted antecedents that substantiate best practices of online facilitation. Findings indicated that understanding the dynamics of online facilitation among relevant stakeholders is critical to improve the teaching and learning experience in distance education.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development in Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) has resulted in the evolution of the educational landscape globally as evidenced in how ICT have transformed the ways professors teach and students learn' in higher education institutions (Fillion & Ekionea, 2012, p.65). Such online learning or e-learning paves the way for the development of new models of learning and pedagogies for open universities which afford students more spatial and temporal flexibility in their learning (Kraft, Chisega-Negrila, Romero & Usart, 2012).

This has made the implementation of online learning relevant to tertiary education, particularly to open universities that deliver courses in the Open Distance Learning (ODL) mode in various models and permutations, blending conventional face-to-face learning environment with ICT-mediated environment (Graham & Allen, 2006, as cited in Gyamfi & Gyaase 2015, p.81). Leveraging the advancement in online learning, Wawasan Open University (WOU) is established as a Malaysian multi-campus, private institution of higher learning to cater to the increasing number of working adults who aspire to further their tertiary education without the need to leave their jobs. This is also in line with the government's policy to create a knowledge economy with highly skilled human resources to steer the country towards the status of a fully developed nation by the year 2020.

Taking into consideration working students' work and family commitments, WOU has adopted a blended delivery model for its ODL courses that offers five face-to-face tutorials conducted on the main campus in Penang and various regional centres nationwide. These regional centres are located in Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Johor Baru and Kuching in addition to three other regional offices in Petaling Jaya, Klang and Subang that provide learner support to students. These face-to-face tutorials are complemented by various provisions of learner support, the chief of which is online learning via *WawasanLearn*, the university's Learning Management System (LMS).

Introduced in 2007, *WawasanLearn* is a Moodle based Learning Management System (LMS) that serves to provide online support to students enrolled in Open Distance Learning (ODL) courses at WOU. It provides the platform for students to access, among others, course materials, supplementary materials, Tutor-marked Assignments (TMAs), specimen Final Exam papers, online quizzes, updates and announcements. Students also have the opportunity to interact with peers, tutor and course co-ordinator and to exchange ideas in online forum. Such predominant use of the LMS highlights the important role tutors play in effectively facilitating students' learning online beyond the classroom, hence the importance of online facilitation. It follows that effective tutoring is part of the factors that contribute to successful presentation of Online Distance Learning (ODL) courses, covering such areas as assessment, teaching and learning and administration.

Research Questions

In WOU, tutors play a central role in facilitating students' learning online in ODL courses. This case study seeks to investigate the various roles tutors play in online facilitation and the tutors' perception of their roles in online facilitation, with a focus on English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. In particular, the study hopes to answer the following research questions:

1. What roles do tutors play in online facilitation of ESL courses in WOU?
2. What challenges do tutors face in carrying out online facilitation of ESL courses in WOU?

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