Tutor's and Site Facilitator's Roles in Wired Class: A Web-Based Learning Environment

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Introduction

Although distance education is recognised by the geographical separation between the tutor and the learner, it does not mean that the learner has a complete control over the programme. The distance tutor could play an important role in the success of learning. Traditional classrooms are characterised by face-to-face interaction between students and the teachers. Teachers prepare lessons, discuss with students, manage the class, select the needed technology, suggest activities, assess students and provide reinforcement. Although traditional distance education programmes tend to be learner-centered, a similar role can be played in this regard, particularly in on-line environments.

Wired Class (available at **http://w134.loten.hull.ac.uk/wiredclass/**) is a Web-based learning environment designed and developed to teach Egyptian secondary school students (14-17 years) at a distance. It includes two maths modules in which students have an active role in conducting and suggesting learning activities. Each module takes a constructivist approach, building on first principles, rather than the more behaviourist approach.

This class attempted to reduce the transactional distance of the learner. This task has been achieved through e-mail, discussion boards, live tutor support and chat sessions, between students and the tutor and among students themselves. Many dynamic components were designed to encourage students to publish their course-related work, exchange ideas and information, build and host their own Web pages and work as independent learners or as a team. Asynchronous as well as synchronous communication techniques were used to facilitate interaction and enrich the learning activities.

These components were designed to be used by students, the on-line tutor or the site facilitator. For example, ask the teacher, quick message, discussion boards, notebook, page builder, Web publisher and presentation board were designed to be used by learners. However, the on-line board, control panel and database manager are management and support tools for the tutor and site facilitator.See Image 1 below, for a look at a Wired Class homepage.

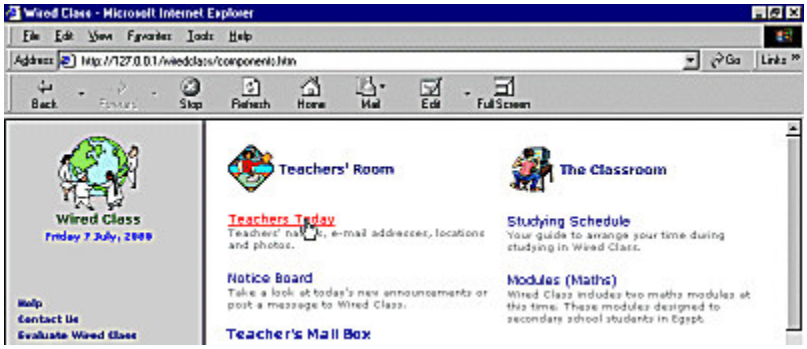

Image 1. Wired Class

Background

In distance education, the role of the distance tutor may be as important as the roles of developers and designers. Trentin and Scimeca (1999) argue that experts assume a leading role in program design, but have to be supported by tutors. For example, the tutor can suggest the type of material and communication to be used, select the human resources to be involved and translate the course objectives into learning activities.

Ferguson (1996) emphasises the role of the distance tutor by distinguishing between two components of distance education environment: the material and the dialogue.

The material should be designed to make reading and understanding the course easier; questions can be used to stimulate reflection and assignments can be given providing an opportunity for two-way interaction (Dede, 1990).

The dialogue, or interaction between the tutor and distance students, is important for motivating and supporting students, activating the use of new knowledge and facilitating assessment of students' progress. Sherry (1996) suggested two main techniques to be used to enrich interaction between the tutor and distance students:

- The distance tutor may visit the distant site, or students may take a trip to a central site.
- Interaction and student support may be provided asynchronously, or synchronously, using e-mail or discussion boards.

In a case study by Wyld and Eklund (1997) it was shown that a paper-based study guide could be used together with some means of communication if dialogue is to be conducted. They suggested that the tutor and students could have a non-contiguous dialogue, exchange information and ideas, questions and feedback.

Schlosser and Anderson (1994) suggested the knowledge and skills which tutors must have as they assume the role of distance tutors. For example the distance tutor should be able to:

- Understand the nature and philosophy of distance education;
- Identify the learner characteristics at distant sites;
- Adapt teaching strategies to deliver instruction at a distance;
- Organise instructional resources in a format suitable for independent study;
- Evaluate student achievement and perceptions at distant sites.

The distance tutor needs to observe, monitor and provide information as appropriate, not deliver a course in a fixed and rigid static format (Brown, 1997). According to Beaudoin (1990), the task of the distance tutor as mentor is much more than merely grading students' submitted

assignments. The distance tutors' roles should be extended to involve the following tasks:

- Grading, after evaluating all student materials;
- Collecting incoming assignments and returning corrected assignments;
- Maintaining current course materials and updating course content as appropriate;
- Developing alternative syllabi and examinations as needed.

Since students at a distance need to be comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning at a distance, efforts should be made to adapt the delivery system to motivate them and meet their needs. Wills (1993) suggested some strategies for the distance tutor to meet the distance students' needs, as follows:

- Make students aware of and comfortable with new patterns of communication;
- Be sensitive to different communication styles and varied cultural backgrounds;
- Assist students to become familiar and comfortable with the delivery technology and prepare them to resolve the technical problems.

Sherry (1996) argues that in recent distance education environments (e.g., Web-based learning environments), additional roles are needed besides the traditional tutor roles. He explained that a team of tutor, technician and service provider must work together to produce and spread a quality distance educational program. Usually, there is one person who is responsible for running the class at a distance, managing students and providing guidelines for both tutor and students. This person is usually known as the site facilitator.

The role of the site facilitator is an extension of that of the distance tutor. Sherry (1996) suggested various roles for the site facilitator. These roles are summarised as follows:

- To promote students' enthusiasm and maintain discipline in the class;
- To ensure the smooth running of equipment;
- To help students with interaction by handing out, collecting and grading papers;
- To guide collaborative groups, answering questions when necessary and assist the tutor when asked.

Schlosser and Anderson (1994) describe many of the site facilitator's features. For example, the site facilitator:

- Is a mid-career tutor rather than inexperienced;
- Is confident in the use of new technology;
- Has general teaching ability rather than the simple desire to be assigned as a facilitator.

Roles of facilitators vary from time to time and depends on the technology. The relationship between the tutor and the facilitator and the tutor's experience with the equipment usually determine facilitator's responsibilities. These can vary between running the system and assisting in supporting students, to just maintaining the system or enrolling students and tutors. Therefore, both the tutor's and facilitator' s responsibilities should be clearly defined before learning sessions.

Because of the distance factor, the tutor and facilitator should employ strategies focusing on the learner and interaction to ensure that the course is delivered successfully and the goals are met. Technology can achieve many of the conventional roles as well as supporting many of these new roles of the distance instructor. The distance tutor should be trained in distance education programs, qualified to teach the appropriate grade level, knowledgeable in the subject area and

able to use different kinds of technology.

Wired Class administration

Wired Class administration refers to the tasks that were performed to ensure that the Wired Class would run smoothly and effectively. Although many of these tasks might be not available with other media or traditional classrooms, these tasks were essential to operate Wired Class as there is no face-to-face interaction and a lack of traditional tutor support and administration.

The initial tasks included in Wired Class administration procedures were as follows.

1. Enrollment

Enrollment was a prerequisite for students to begin studying with Wired Class. According to its design, every student should fill-in and submit an on-line, Web-based form, that includes information such as his/her name, date of birth, school,etc.

Using the registration form, every student had to choose a username and password to be used every time in accessing Wired Class and in contacting the tutor. A link to the registration form, made available in the starting page, allowed students to access it easily.

All students' enrollment information was handled and recorded using server-side CGI scripts in conjunction with MS Access database.Together, this allowed the on-line tutor to monitor the registration records and help students who had access problems or forgot their passwords.

At the end of registration procedure, every student was asked to access the help page to explore the different components of Wired Class, their functions and how could they used.

2. Required e-mail account

Having an e-mail account for each student in Wired Class was an initial demand. Without e-mail, it would be difficult for the on-line tutor to post and receive messages to and from students. A Web-based e-mail service was provided to students from within Wired Class.

Every student was asked to access e-mail page and sign-up for an e-mail account. Students were asked to use the same username and password as they used to access Wired Class. It was pointed out that students should ask for help from the local technician at school if they faced any problem while signing-up. Students were encouraged to send a confirmation message to the on-line tutor telling him he/she had accessed and used e-mail successfully.

3. Required student homepage

Building a Web page for every student, containing his/her personal and contact information as well as a photo, was an essential task. These pages would help the tutor to remember students' faces and names, which is critical in distance education. In addition, links offered in students' Web pages might provide a good opportunity to begin conversation and exchange ideas among students. Page Builder offered a practical solution for students to build good-looking Web pages effectively.

As soon as any student accessed Wired Class, his/her name would be added automatically to the On-line Students page with a link to his/her page allowing others in Wired Class to know who was on-line at the same time and access his/her page to see his/her photo or contact him/her. If an

on-line student had not built his/her page yet, the link to his/her page would be broken.

4. Registration confirmation

Signing-up for an access username and password, e-mail account and building a page were the prerequisites for every student to continue in Wired Class and to access the first lesson. At an early stage of implementing Wired Class, the tutor attempted to be sure that every student had accomplished these initial tasks and become familiar with the new learning environment.

5. Time-tabling and scheduling

Although the Web offers a flexible medium for students to access learning anytime/anywhere, time-tabling and scheduling were necessary to ensure that all students knew when and how they were expected to finish studying the modules of Wired Class. The need to timetable was highlighted since it is recommended to keep a group of students studying the same module at the same time.

An undated study schedule was prepared and presented within Wired Class to help students to monitor and assess their progress. The schedule assumed that students would be able to study two lessons a week and that they would complete studying the two modules and answer the achievement tests in eight weeks.

6. Introducing students to one another

In the early days, students were encouraged to access Wired Class students' Web pages every time they access Wired Class and provide their feedback and comments about the information included. The objective of this activity was to encourage students to get to know and contact one another, to reduce the distance among them.

Furthermore, the tutor encouraged students to send e-mail messages to their Wired Class mates and exchange their ideas and views about studying in Wired Class. At the same time, students in the same school were encouraged to stay with each other at the end of every session to discuss what they had done and any problem they faced.

Tutor's and site facilitator's roles in Wired Class

Once implementation of Wired Class was begun, the on-line tutor and the facilitator played important roles to in administration and supporting students over a distance.

The principal role of the tutor was to facilitate two types of interaction: learner-learner interaction and learner-educational materials interaction. However, the principal role of site facilitator was to undertake other, non-educational, tasks needed to make Wired Class run smoothly (e.g., registration, students' technical and scheduling problems, etc.).

Although the roles in Wired Class were shared out between the tutors and facilitators, students did not recognise the distinction between the roles of tutors and facilitators. For example, the tutor received many messages from students regarding problems of accessing Wired Class or Internet connection.

The roles of both the on-line tutor and facilitator were exchangeable and can be categorized into two main functions: monitoring and support. Monitoring could be done depending on many techniques, while support included instructional, organisational and technical support.

I. Monitoring

Since attendance in Wired Class was mandatory, the initial role of the tutor and facilitators was to track student attendance. Unlike traditional methods, in Wired Class tracking student's attendance rate was an easy job. When any student logged-into Wired Class, or logged-out, his/her name was added to a *logged-in* or *logged-out* page, which allowed the facilitator, and students as well, to know who was on-line and who was logged-out.

However, monitoring students' attendance is not enough, particularly with young learners. Attending Wired Class according to the schedule and spending minutes or hours on-task, would not necessarily mean that students were learning or perforing the excercises as intended. To know whether students were actually doing the work or not, students were monitored using two methods: student's track and student's records

1.Tracks students participation

Using the *student's track* script, located at the *control panel*, the tutor could detect every student's movement in Wired Class, from when he/she logged-in until he/she logged-out. The facilitator could know whether the student had accessed important components (e.g., the notice board and modules), how long he/she spent in each component, to which component he/she moved and whether or not he/she responded to the tutor's suggestions or not.

2. Maintains and monitors student performance record

Student participation was required. The majority of Wired Class components allowed for interactive or two-way components. In every lesson, for example, each student participated in a public discussion and was requitered to answer some questions privately. The private responses were submitted to the tutor for review.

II. Support

1. Provides general support

Distance education students have their own problems, which differ from these in traditional classroom. The majority of these problems can be attributed to the limitations of the distance education medium, whether a written or one-way medium. However, some of these problems would occur in many distance education programs across the Web as well. For example,

- The lack of student-to-tutor and student-to-students face-to-face interaction;
- The unfamiliar type of self-study and related problems (planning, scheduling, etc.);
- Unfamiliarity with the Web as a learning environment;
- Unfamiliarity with new Web-based learning approaches;
- The lack of suitable and sufficient learning resources;
- The feeling of isolation;
- Internet connection- and access-related technical problems.

Well-planned human support and Web-based two-way interaction could overcome many of these limitations and problems that may face students over a distance. Simpson (2000) suggested two types of support that can be delivered to students over a distance: academic support and non-academic support. The first type is related to the tutor' tutorial activities, however the second concerns counseling or organisational activities.

In Wired Class, the first form of support was called *instructional support* and the second form called *organisational and technical* support. The first form was carried out by the on-line tutor, while the second was provided by the facilitator. The intention in separating between these two roles was to help the on-line tutor to focus on his educational duties, rather than having to perform other tasks that could be undertaken by others who did not have experience in teaching the subject.

2. Provides instructional support

Together with the online support documentation, tutors aimed to:

- **Explain and answer students' questions**

Since it was supposed that students would use the course material individually, without the help of the tutor, learner-content interaction and support methods were emphasised. The tutor was available via e-mail or sometimes phone, to answer students' questions or provide alternative explanations as needed.

This role might be one of the principal reasons that made students distinguish between the Web and computer-based instruction and feel that there was someone who could help them if they could not understand a difficult concept or answer a question. This role was not limited to answering students' questions but it was extended to advising students to follow a specific path or to explore or experience other materials available in other sites.

- **Develop and suggest learning activities**

Developing and suggesting learning activities was an important role of the tutor in Wired Class. Learning activities varied between student-centered activities (e.g., participating in discussion boards, updating their Web pages by new related links and conducting Web search) and activities that depended much more on the tutor (e.g., suggesting discussing topics and updating the hot topics list to be useful to the current lesson).

Discussion boards were one of the essential student-centered activities in Wired Class. The main role of the tutor was to encourage students and to get them participate in the discussion board at the end of every lesson. The tutor might allow students to suggest their own discussion topic or form their own group, or he might form a group of students himself. If students are located at the same school, it might be better to allow students to come together in a group or groups of their own choosing.

On the other hand, since Wired Class contained students from three different schools, the tutor, based on school teachers' information about students' common interests and academic levels, other small discussion groups could be set up as needed.

- **Maintain current materials and develop new materials as appropriate**

Monitoring and updating Wired Class materials was a continuous process, not restricted by the design and development phase. Students' reactions, feedback and progress were the essential stimulus for maintaining or updating the course materials.

Since the tutor is the person who was in contact with students, he was responsible for observing students' reactions and collecting comments related to the construction and content of materials. These reactions and comments were taken into serious consideration allowing necessary

modification to be made.

- **Assess students' progress and provide feedback**

Formative evaluation was carried out throughout Wired Class. One of the essential roles of the tutor was gathering information about students' progress, as reflected in the formative evaluation, in order to make appropriate choices and provide feedback.

Although each lesson was provided with self-assessment questions and feedback, the tutor's role was to check every student's answer individually, to give a grade for every student then provide the appropriate feedback.

3. Provides organisational and technical support

On the other hand, the organisational and technical support aimed to:

- **Update students' records**

Updating students' records could be managed by the facilitators since it is an administrative rather than an instructional operation. Updating students' records included accessing the Wired Class Web server, gathering students' marks as given by the tutor then using the *edit students' marks* script to inform students about their marks in each lesson.

Updating students' records included collecting students' marks in the formative and summative achievement tests then informing them of the results so they would know whether they had passed the current module or not. In addition, facilitators were responsible for updating the Wired Class database with the names of students who had dropped out of Wired Class or did not attend an acceptable number of on-line sessions.

- **Motivate students**

The lack of face-to-face interaction and the feeling of isolation among students might be two principal reasons behind the feeling of frustration that could lead students to drop out of the an on-line class. One of the important roles of the facilitator was encouraging students to continue studying in Wired Class.

In Wired Class, one solution was to visit students in their schools and encourage them to continue studying in depth. In addition, awards were given to the student or students who gained high marks in the final test and who participated in Wired Class activities.

- **Ensure the smooth running of the Web site**

The Web, like other media, requires maintenance. In Wired Class the facilitators were responsible for maintaining the software and hardware used by Wired Class. The MS Personal Web Server that was running Wired Class was accessed remotely using a Graphical User Interface, allowing the facilitator to watch the performance and the logs file of the server and fix any access related problems.

A server-side facilitator, who was responsible for keeping the PC machine at the University of Hull that was running the server and hosted Wired Class, was in touch with the site facilitator on the other side. The role of the former facilitator was essential since some technical problems were impossible to be solved remotely (e.g., if the system was switched off or crashed).

Conclusion

The nature of on-line distance education environments has changed the traditional relationship between the tutor and students, on the one hand, and the roles of the tutor and site facilitator, on the other. This relationship and these roles depend on the level of students, the structure of the learning environment and the experience of tutors and facilitators.

On-line tutor could help students by explaining difficult concepts using examples or suggesting external links, encourage students to communicate, participate, meet each other on-line and submit course-related work.

The site facilitator could help in the evaluation, purchase, installation and support of software and hardware as well as implementing and maintaining successful uses of technology. In addition he/she should motivate and advise students as well as tutors to utilise the technology. The site facilitator could interact with students as well as the tutor and forward unanswered questions or unclear points to the tutor.

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