

Establishing a digital tutoring hub to support students in a virtual space

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The challenge

The arrival of Covid-19 and the measures taken to reduce the spread of the virus meant that we at the University of Exeter, in common with colleagues around the globe, immediately moved our teaching online: as face to face teaching stopped, so too did face to face tutoring. Our tutoring framework relied on face to face interaction. We could see that a new procedure was essential, and it needed to be rolled out at speed, with training and resources available as quickly as possible. In this paper I will describe how the deployment of Microsoft Teams, Class Notebook, and Microsoft Bookings, as a tutoring 'hub', supported Academic Personal Tutors (APTs) and their tutees in a virtual space.

Traditionally the appetite for digital solutions in UK higher education has been slow to evolve; Laurillard (2008) suggested that education has been on the brink of digital transformation for decades. The affordances of the various digital tools have been publicised, but for students the 'lived experience' of being at university does not fit well with a digital interface, while academics have been slow to take advantage of technological tools, whether due to a lack of training (Kenny, 2013), lack of experience, or a deep seated belief in 'traditional' pedagogy (Aldunate and Neussbaum, 2013). The pandemic swept aside such concerns as there was no alternative to operating in a digital space, creating an imperative to redesign what we do to best support our student body (Wakefield, 2020).

The response

At the University of Exeter, the APT is the first point of contact for students, so we knew that the team of APTs had to be equipped with a way to work with their tutees in a safe virtual space. As the Covid-19 phenomenon was having serious effects on student wellbeing (Montacute and Holt-White, 2021) we knew it was essential that appointments could be made, meetings held, and note taking and developmental activities facilitated. We identified a suite of tools which could help us to accomplish this: Microsoft Bookings to make appointments, Teams to provide a virtual space to meet and chat, and Class Notebook to provide collaborative and private workspace for tutors and tutees. These tools also allowed us to develop the tutoring curriculum to better fit the online space.

Aware that these tools were new to the university, and to most staff and students, we realised that a training programme was a priority. Of course, this too needed to be delivered remotely. A SharePoint space was created to host a series of mini video clips and documents addressing the initial set up of the tools. At the same time a template Notebook was developed to inspire use of the notebook, and recorded walkthroughs of the material were produced and stored centrally to allow easy access for all tutors. These support materials were provided in a variety of formats to ensure that our team of tutors were supported in the ways that suited them best. We realised that our students too would need support in using these tools, so conversations were started with our student facing teams to mirror this provision.

Discussion with student groups highlighted that a key concern was loss of community: student representatives particularly talked about missing 'corridor conversations'. We could see that the virtual space afforded by Teams allowed peer support mechanisms to be developed, later year students sharing their knowledge and experience with first years. This was successfully rolled out in the Teams space in several disciplines in 2020-21 and we are encouraging others to adopt this initiative in the coming year.

Knowing that colleagues were already overburdened with the enormity of moving their teaching online and students were concerned about changes in their university experience, we wanted to make the adoption of these tools as straightforward as possible. A central bank of resources was created to be shared across the institution. As far as possible these resources were crafted from existing tutoring activities. Incorporated into

the Notebook were examples of existing good practice, for example, the skills assessment and development tools offered by the Academic, Personal and Professional Learning Evaluation (APPLE) form (Taylor, 2020) and *Humanities in a digital world* (Birkett, Ward and Jones, 2019). These self-evaluation and evidence building tools work well in an eportfolio. They provide a focus for students to plan their own development, and work with their tutor and tutor group to identify goals and how to achieve them. We could see that our approach was working when these templates were adopted by tutors in different areas of the university.

Microsoft Bookings proved to be a popular means of facilitating tutor/tutee meetings. The ease with which appointments can be made and changed has proved very welcome, with tutors reporting an increase in students taking advantage of one-to-one support. In a survey of students more than 50% said that they wished to retain virtual tutoring. Tutors too liked the simplicity afforded by this easy way to make time available to their tutees.

Recommendations

We have seen that through the development of an institution wide solution, in a way which was augmented by the digital tools, we were able to share best practice across disciplinary boundaries. Moving forward, we intend to retain the possibilities offered by tutoring in a digital space, such as virtual meetings and using eportfolios to develop skills. We have seen a need for research into our experiences to identify the gains from our response to Covid-19 and to inform future practice as well as helping us to better support our students in the future. We have therefore commenced a small-scale project working with staff and students to learn more about their experiences during the response to Covid-19.

References

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Karen Kenny is an Academic Developer at the University of Exeter. Her main focus is on Academic Personal Tutoring, guiding academics to refine their practice. She is particularly interested in supporting non-traditional students into higher education and helping them to achieve their goals.