Chapter 12
Supporting Virtual Learning Through E-Tutoring

Birgitta Kopp
Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Germany

Melanie Germ
Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Germany

Heinz Mandl
Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Germany

ABSTRACT

E-tutoring is a hot topic in the context of virtual learning. As such learning environments become more prevalent in schools, universities or vocational training, providing adequate support for learners is becoming increasingly important – not only for individual, but also for collaborative learning. Therefore, there has been a lot of interest in using e-tutoring to foster learning processes and improve the performance of learners. Furthermore, an e-tutor can help prevent phenomena which are common in e-learning environments, such as feeling anonymous and isolated. In this chapter, we would like to first provide a theoretical introduction to e-tutoring that includes the definition, tasks and competencies of an e-tutor. Secondly, we will discuss the e-tutor in action, illustrated by a training for e-tutors and a virtual seminar which was supported by an e-tutor.

E-TUTORING: A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

E-tutoring is a hot topic in the context of virtual learning. Virtual learning environments are becoming increasingly common in different contexts – in schools, universities and vocational training (for an overview of this development see Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). Therefore, the adequate support of learners is also becoming increasingly important. Furthermore, the use of collaborative learning is also increasing, which places higher demands on learners – especially when the collaboration is designed and tailored to improve learning processes and learning outcomes. As designing e-collaborative learning units is a central task of the e-tutor, e-tutoring is closely related to e-collaboration. But what exactly is e-tutoring? What are the tasks of an e-tutor and which competencies does he need?
In the first three sections, we will answer these three theory-related questions by giving a definition of e-tutoring as well as by describing the tasks and competencies of an e-tutor. We will then show the e-tutor in action in two steps: First, we will describe a training on e-tutoring with its content and evaluation data. Second, we will discuss the actions of an e-tutor during a virtual seminar and examine the evaluation data on these specific interventions.

Defining E-Tutoring

Online learning is increasing in everyday work and further education contexts as well as in schools, universities and vocational training. But often times the e-learning environments are designed such that learners are not able to learn with them effectively – because of technical problems, an overly complex structure of the learning environment, content that is too demanding or due to individual problems with self-directed learning and motivation. In such cases, an e-tutor is essential for handling such problems when learning in an e-learning environment.

But what is an e-tutor? There are a wide range of different names that are almost used interchangeably, but do not always mean the same thing. Rautenstrauch (2001) lists different names for an e-tutor, e. g. Tele-tutor, Online-Coach, E-Moderator, Tele-Teacher, Online-Facilitator or E-Trainer. All these names are used to describe the same phenomenon, namely the support of e-learners, even though the range of tasks may differ depending on the respective name. In order to avoid misunderstandings, our terminology describes an e-tutor as a person who supports the individual and collaborative online learning processes of his/her learners. In this definition, e-tutoring comprises all the activities of a teacher that support a learner in constructively and actively dealing with the learning environment. Thus, the e-tutor’s main function is to supervise his learners.

The tasks of an e-tutor are even more demanding since the communicative situation greatly differs between e-learning and face-to-face communication due to missing non-verbal signals and extra-linguistic signs. Furthermore, an e-tutor should be competent not only in content-specific knowledge and social skills, but also in knowledge about the functioning of the Internet, technical skills and knowledge of net-based communication (Salmon, 2000). Especially the last three competencies are relevant when learning online.

To gain deeper insight into the tasks and competencies of an e-tutor, we will describe them in greater detail in the next section.

Tasks of an E-Tutor

E-tutoring specifically comprises two main tasks: Tasks for preparing and organizing the learning unit and tasks for supporting the learning processes. While the first tasks are especially relevant before starting the learning unit, the second tasks are necessary during the learning unit.

Tasks for Preparing and Organizing the Learning Unit

The e-learning environment is a key aspect to consider before starting the learning unit. Even though e-tutors do not design the learning environment in terms of content, tasks or didactical design, they must be familiar with them before starting the learning unit. As the learning objectives and the learning material mostly determine the chosen methods and media, the e-tutor can evaluate whether the design of the learning environment is valuable from a didactical perspective.

One main focus should be on the learning tasks which provide learners an opportunity to acquire and apply their knowledge. Tasks should spark the interest and motivation of the learners by using inspiring descriptions or by incorporating the learners’ own experiences (Deci, & Ryan, 1993; Hidi, & Harackiewicz, 2000). Furthermore, dividing tasks into sub-tasks may simplify the learning