

# WHAT STUDENTS EXPECT FROM E-MODERATION

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**Abstract:** Overall, students have evaluated the tutoring processes at the Virtuelle Fachhochschule—Virtual University of Applied Sciences—positively. The interviewees, however, gave very different opinions, which varied with the individual needs of the student. The fields in which our tutoring was offered (including social, professional, technical and organisational aspects) and other crucial factors (i.e. response times of tutors) received diverse ratings. The variety of these responses was summed up in proposals for improvement, which, among others, suggested more flexible communication, tutoring and doctrine. Furthermore, a stronger integration of a conventional academic doctrine was suggested.

**Key words:** Computer Assisted Instruction, Tutoring, Virtual learning organization

## 1. INTRODUCTION

E-Moderation is a key element of eLearning programs. It is not only interesting for theoretical discussions, but more and more it is considered to be a crucial factor in underpinning the realisation of e-Learning goals within large projects—such as many e-Learning projects at the Virtuelle Fachhochschule (VFH).

A successful implementation of e-Moderation or e-Tutoring concepts requires, as essential elements, both knowledge of the range of students' needs, and to take their proposals for course improvement into consideration. Questions regarding central aspects such as quicker response times, an increased level of active tutoring and a general balancing of the tutoring are critical factors for the success of the course and overall student satisfaction.

## 2. STUDYING AT THE VFH

Several Masters and Bachelors degree courses in Computer Science and Economic Engineering have been developed within the German pilot project ‘Virtual University of Applied Sciences for Technology, Computer Sciences and Business Administration’ ([www.vfh.de](http://www.vfh.de)). These courses are mainly taught online. Some 20% of them use a blended learning approach—which combines online and face-to-face approaches—via the Blackboard Learning System™. Twelve Universities of Applied Sciences and two university colleges, as well as commercial partners, are involved in the project. After several pilot phases, a Bachelor degree course in Computer Science started in autumn of 2001 with 166 students. This course is carried out by some of the co-operating project partners on the basis of networking arrangements between several German Universities of Applied Sciences. The students themselves are enrolled in one of these participating Universities of Applied Sciences.

## 3. TUTORING AT THE VFH

Students are supervised by student and scientific assistant tutors, as well as by academic staff lecturers from the University of Applied Sciences in which the students are enrolled. Besides being available during office hours for appointments, the tutors implement the online-tutoring process. The main part of the tutoring process takes place in the ‘learning room’ of the *Blackboard Learning System*™. There are two approaches to online tutoring (e-Moderation). In the first approach, student and scientific assistant tutors use Blackboard and the Instant Messaging System *ICQ* ([www.icq.com](http://www.icq.com)) to communicate with students. In the second approach academic staff lecturers would use Blackboard and the audio conference tool *Netucate* ([www.netucate.com](http://www.netucate.com)) for audio-chats and application sharing. A weekly two-hour audio conference was offered to students of each module.

## 4. EVALUATION

Different evaluation tools were used to evaluate the tutoring process. To determine the students’ opinions, questionnaires were used in conjunction with focus-group interviews. After evaluating the 62 returned questionnaires, telephone interviews were also conducted with the interviewees. In addition to this, the students’ messages in 23 discussion forums were analysed. The forums were initially analysed from a quantitative point of view and were

then reviewed based on the *Qualitative Content Analysis* according to Mayring (2000). Finally, the findings were listed, coded, and assigned to inductively defined categories.

#### **4.1 Weighting the tutoring**

Tutoring, as such, is increasingly considered the crucial factor in the realisation of eLearning programs. However, even when learning content is adapted and presented in an excellent fashion with the help of multi-media applications, and delivered in an online interactive environment, it cannot guarantee the success of an e-Learning course. Teaching and learning are always brought across in a social context. In other words, teaching always consists of two components: an informational and a communicative component (Kerres 1998). Therefore, for the learning process to be effective, it is vital to receive personal feedback, which goes beyond computer generated spell-checks or the mere return of information about a learning deficit.

Students also share this point of view. More than 85% of the students stated that 'the tutoring is just as important as the course design itself'. When asked to complete the phrase 'Learning at the *VFH* without appropriate tutoring is...?', students responded with answers such as '... it is not much different from buying yourself a book and learning...', or '... like not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel...', or even 'impossible to do'.

#### **4.2 Assessment of tutoring**

Overall, the tutors' competence at the *VFH* was well rated by the students. Yet certain distinctions need to be made. Differences existed not only between the assessment of single tutoring aspects and respective courses, but also between the tutoring approaches and statements regarding central aspects such as response times.

##### **4.2.1 Specific course characteristics**

While 73% of the interviewees noted course-specific differences, there was a wide spectrum of answers to the question of the nature of those differences. 'A different personal commitment' on the tutors' part was demanded with the positive qualification that this commitment was in any case, 'not bad anywhere'. Another finding revealed concerns about varying response times to course questions. The lack of a synchronous communication via chat-rooms was also pointed out.

#### 4.2.2 Tutoring aspects

The very different levels of student needs played an integral role in the different evaluation of the tutoring process. This becomes clear by looking at central aspects—like the request for quicker response from tutors. 33% of the interviewees agreed with the statement ‘I would have liked a quicker response from the tutors’, whereas 20% were indecisive and 47% rejected it. However, according to the quantitative communication analysis of the discussion forums, response times by tutors were appropriate. The forums were mainly designed to facilitate an exchange between the students, so that a large part of the communication was self-regulated. The tutors only played a supporting role. Hence, response times in the forum were clearly longer than responses based on email communication. Questions which arose and that were directed at tutors were answered relatively quickly (on average within 45 hours). This number is not too significant, as answers by the interviewees varied immensely. The following graph shows how many responses were provided in 24 and/or 48 hours, respectively.

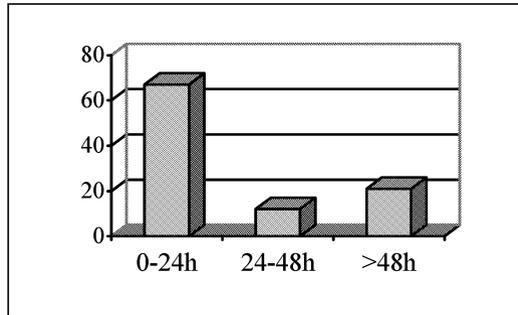


Figure 1. Response times of the tutors in the discussion forum

Answers as differentiated as those to response time satisfaction (above) were also found in the reactions to the following statement: ‘... the tutoring process should not only consist of answers to questions, but tutors should also be more active and thought-provoking (i.e. more cross-checks)’. Here, 47% of the interviewees agreed, 13% were indecisive and 40% were of a contrary opinion. The widespread demand for active tutoring is didactically and methodically understandable. However, it is not always identical with the students’ interests and expectations. The differences were also manifested in the general views about the course of studies. Besides a certain degree of flexibility, many students also valued the fact, that online-learning

is embedded into a social context. For other students flexibility alone is vital and they believed that, as such, there is no need for social communication.

### 4.2.3 Areas of competence

Similar differences were found in the assessment of the individual areas of tutoring competence. Moderation was defined as ‘chairing’ a meeting or a discussion. In the electronic world, however, it combines different roles: to hold meetings, to encourage students, to provide information, to raise questions, to summarise etc. (cf. Salmon 2000). For this reason, it is not surprising that an abundance of different classifications for tutoring areas can be found in the literature. A common pattern is found in Berge & Collins (2000), who define the roles of tutors in e-learning as filters, fire-fighters, facilitators, editors, managers, discussion leaders, content managers, assistants, and marketers. When dividing their roles into the different areas of activity, we can distinguish between the following (i.e. Bonk, Kirkley, Hara & Dennen, 2001):

- Technical aspects (Do students have the required basic knowledge? Does their equipment work? Do their passwords work?);
- Managerial aspects (Do students understand the assignment and course structure?);
- Pedagogical aspects (How are students interacting, drawing up conclusions, debating, thinking?);
- Social aspects (What is the general tone? Is there a human side to the course? Is joking allowed?).

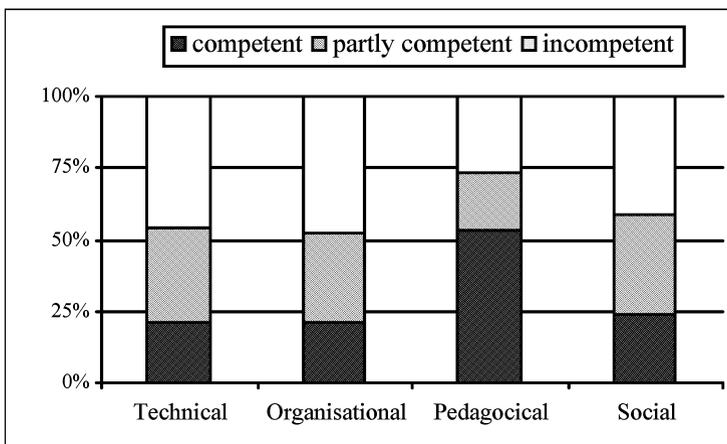


Figure 2. Weighting of the tutoring

From an organisational point of view, the tutors' competence was remarkably well appraised, probably because potential problems had largely been eliminated in previous pilot phases. The fact that social competence was appraised more negatively in relation to organisational competence can possibly be explained in terms of the situation being a new one for both students and tutors. Achieving the required excellence with computer-aided communication tools is primarily time-dependent. Some tutors had the required virtual socialisation skills already, while others had to acquire them.

Professional competence was generally appraised positively. Some aspects of the didactic design (i.e. outstanding responses and solutions to the practice tasks) were evaluated negatively. Frustration with deficiencies in the courses might have affected the generally positive assessment of the course in regard to the tutors' perceived pedagogic competence. We came across similar findings in the area of technology. Here, a hanging or crashed server was mentioned as the main problem. This fact overshadowed the otherwise very positive evaluation of the technical competence of the tutors.

### **4.3 Tutoring Concepts**

The differences between the concepts of tutoring or e-Moderation were much less significant than we had initially assumed. A survey regarding general satisfaction with the course suggested similar results, despite differences in the concepts (cf. Arnold, Kilian & Thilloßen 2002). Moreover, the tutoring concepts were largely evaluated similarly in all four areas of competence. Course-specific differences were larger than those between the tutoring models. It became evident that the decisive factor was not the tutoring concept as such, but, rather, the personal commitment of the tutors.

### **4.4 Proposals for Improvement**

Students' proposals for improvement varied as much as the evaluation of the tutoring itself. Some proposals suggested a higher degree of flexibility, quicker response, and increased tutor availability. A method of flexible and spontaneous communication has already been established through the tutoring process, especially by integrating an Instant Messaging System (ICQ). Other suggestions highlighted the need for tutors to be available after 5pm, and even on weekends, via phone. While the central advantage of e-Learning is its high flexibility, implementing such proposals for a more responsive 24-7 tutoring program are difficult from an organisational point of view, and not always possible because of their high cost implications.

The demand for better collaboration between module authors and tutors is another key issue. Inconsistencies and problems occasionally arose

because authors also developed parts of the tutoring concept. At the beginning of a course, the learning material and targets are not necessarily well known to all tutors. Moreover, in this starting phase, tutors need to be available at short notice for inquiries regarding the course material. Faults in the course material result in frustration on the part of the student. Hence, good quality material is of central importance for an improved level of tutoring. Demands from module authors for more participation in the module, i.e. personal input in discussion forums, start-up moderation, taking on tasks, discussion stimulation and feedback distribution, and for ‘tutors with more background knowledge’ have to be considered.

Students also addressed the use of different communication tools. Within this context, it was suggested to move the focus of attention: to hold ‘regular chats (with a limited number of participants) once per week in which special questions about the respective fields can be discussed’. Altogether, both students and tutors used the chat function in *Blackboard* comparatively rarely. Part of the students also requested the availability of tutors by phone. The phone as a communication tool played an essential role within the learning group altogether. In general, the need for spontaneous and direct synchronous communication became evident.

Another central aspect concerned the request for more personal contact to the tutors. Many students emphasised explicitly that ‘personal contact’ and ‘personal conversation’ with the tutors are positive moments in the tutoring process. In the survey, one student explicitly pointed out that lunch with professors, tutors and students during the course ‘is especially important as a social component’. The demand for replenishing and/or varying the doctrine goes hand in hand with this. The demand for a stronger integration in the course of studies with tutors was expressed relatively often. The general assumption that students would primarily prefer the flexibility and the anonymity of the online-learning could not be confirmed. On the contrary, ‘the possibility of a partial integration into the ‘normal’ course of studies of the University of Applied Sciences (i.e. participating in practical exercises, etc.)’ was directly addressed.

## **5. SUMMARY**

Above all, the evaluation of the tutoring or e-Moderation at the *VFH* reveals a broad variety of responses due to the different needs of students. Questions about central issues, such as faster responses or more active tutoring, produced diverse responses. The different student needs became evident in the proposals for improvement. Nevertheless, tendencies may be

inferred. First, better communication between tutors and course authors is essential. There is definite room for improvement.

Another aspect concerned the students' request for more flexibility in tutoring. The requested '24-7' tutoring is neither necessary nor feasible, but meeting requests for more personal tutoring is feasible. On one hand, the direct and individual online-tutoring by means of telephone and chat has to be increased. On the other hand, personal contact with tutors was requested for the single stages of the course. Although the *VFH* already practises online-learning as 'Blended Learning' it would be worthwhile considering whether and how one could reshape the *VFH* towards a greater incorporation of blended-learning' concepts.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Udo Hinze and Gerold Blakowskis' fields of research include the conceptual design and realisation of ICT-based learning with a focus on computer aided learning. Recent research and development projects have explored a wide range of tutoring aspects of ICT-based learning.