A mixed methods study exploring HWSC student experience of online tuition

Transcript

Sharon: Hi, my name is Sharon Mallon. I'm a Senior Lecturer in Mental Health working in the School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care.

Chris: Hello, my name is Chris Richards and I'm an Associate Lecturer in the School of Health Wellbeing and Social Care.

Sharon: Our project is a scholarship project looking at synchronous learning events, so looking at events that take place online where both the tutor and the students are there at the same time interacting and we're exploring what works and what doesn't work.

Chris: And it comes out of my background as an Associate Lecturer working with students. When we moved to online learning, we found that often the numbers that turned up were quite low and the level of engagement was also quite low and so I wanted to find out more about that.

Sharon: Involved in the project with us is Andy Rixon, who's a Senior Lecturer in Children and Young People, and we're all working together to both do a literature review and to collect data from students and tutors.

Chris: From the project we hope to find out more about how students and tutors experience the synchronous online learning and try and find ways that we can help them use it better and get more out of it.

Sharon: So, what we want to find out from this project is what works in terms of online learning when both the tutor and student are in the room together, what students like about that, what they don't like about that and what their expectations are and also then how we can design the core material that will support that and support tutors in the discovery of that.

Chris: Initially we've carried out a literature search and we've actually put that together as a scoping review, which has just been submitted for publication. We intend to use surveys with students and we are intending to do some interviews and hopefully maybe also actually look at online sessions and see what we can learn from that.

Sharon: So, from the literature review so far what we find is that actually surprisingly the evidence base isn't great for what works in synchronous learning, so we don't really know what students expect or want and we also don't know too much about what teachers' experience of this mode of teaching is. The other thing that I found quite surprising was that technology actually hasn't moved on that much, so some of the early studies were showing that webcams were already possible, students were already able to log in and see their teachers and view their students, but there's a bit of reluctance to use that so we've also found that there's nothing dramatic changed in the last 20 years, so we've been able to say something about that.

The other thing we found was that there is a reluctance among tutors also to use their webcam but that students really, really like it because then they can see what the tutor's like and read their body language; as well as listening to them, it's very important to see the body language of the tutor when they're learning from them.

Chris: We've also found that the tutor is key to the success of the sessions and that they need to be well organized, the sessions need to be structured to enable the students to feel sort of engaged and involved and also that the students need to feel or like to feel they're part of a learning community, that they are actually interacting with each other and with the teacher.

The project is important I think particularly at this time when so many institutions are having to take on board students learning in the online environment. The OU has been doing this for a number of years but we obviously still have a lot to learn and I think that what this project can helpfully provide is the basis to help us develop maybe a new pedagogy in online teaching rather than just trying to take what we do in the classroom online.

Sharon: From my perspective this project is important because I'm currently designing a new module for The Open University and I really want to use the best evidence available to design the online synchronous part of our teaching so those things that we do with students in a real life setting where both are present at the same time and I don't think that in the past we've necessarily looked very carefully at the evidence we've just designed thinking, you know, how does this work with our module, rather than thinking how do people experience this in the real world?

I personally hope to gain from this project a better understanding of our students' experience of our online teaching. I was an OU student myself and so it's really important to me that we continue to move with times and to use technology and I want to know better how to do that.

Chris: For me, what I would like to personally gain, and I think will personally gain from the project, is maybe first of all the opportunity to be part of a research project it's something I've not done for quite a long time and it's really nice to get back into that but also to look at it as a tutor as somebody who is actually teaching I'm hoping that, as Sharon has said, that we will collect information that will support teachers in what they do and improve the learning experience for students.