

Students Need To Know That Tutoring Is A Must- Do

In the original "Star Wars," the message that sets the plot in motion is a 3- D hologram. While that may have represented the future of communications, it's probably not the future of online tutoring.



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But that's not what I might have told you before last summer, when I taught two online courses. Over the last three decades, I've worked as a professor and administrator to help lead educational innovations in open educational resources, online education and basic skills initiatives. In that period, I've seen lots of changes be embraced, including smartboards and online collaboration platforms. I knew that in the few years since I'd last taught online, online audio and video had been integrated into online tutoring software. And I would have bet that students would jump at the chance to talk with their professors and tutors using online audio and video, instead of relying on chat and whiteboards exclusively.

I was wrong. I had felt sure that it would be easier for students to talk through the problems they were having understanding the material in the Intermediate algebra and elementary statistics. But students told me they were much more comfortable writing formulas on the online collaborative platform, WorldWideWhiteboard, and then switching to the chat window — even though WorldWideWhiteboard and NetTutor, developed by Link- Systems International (LSI), have online audio and video built into them.

As chief academic officer for the California Community Colleges (CCC) Online Education Initiative (OEI), I knew a lot about our resources and offerings but the reason

I decided to teach those two summer courses was so I could further answer two questions:

1. How do students use the support resources we make available?
2. Do students feel those resources provided real value?

In terms of how students actually use the online whiteboard and online tutoring service, I found out that students overwhelmingly preferred communicating via the chat window or writing directly on the whiteboard. I learned this within the first two weeks. Typically, the first time I met with a new student during online office hours using WorldWide Whiteboard, I would offer to talk using online audio, and with the exception of one student who was willing to use online audio, the rest very clearly preferred to communicate with me and with NetTutor's tutors via text rather than talking.

Ultimately, I concluded that the decision to use the online chat window or write on the whiteboard versus online audio or video is a generational one. It's just what students are comfortable with — while faculty members I spoke with more often preferred talking to typing.

Interestingly, I was able to further test the generational theory when I helped my son, who is working on a master's degree and needed a refresher in statistics. We were texting and emailing back and forth, when I finally asked him if we could talk instead. From my perspective, it would be faster and much easier to pick up the phone and talk through the concepts. That experience with my son reinforced to me that the preference for writing is a generational one. I still think it's important to have online audio and video built into online whiteboards and online tutoring services such as NetTutor as an option. I also realize that these preferences are a reminder of students' different communication and learning styles.

Meanwhile, to test whether our resources are used and valued by our students, I took some steps. I offered an extra- credit assignment in which students were instructed to take a problem or concept that was giving them problems from the first two chapters, and ask a NetTutor tutor for help. To get the credit, students needed to email me their question with evidence that they had interacted with a NetTutor (by sharing two ways the tutor helped them). Nearly 60 percent of students who passed elementary statistics completed the NetTutor assignment. What's more: each of those students sought out support from NetTutor at least one additional time during the course. By contrast, only 5-10 percent of on- campus students visit tutoring centers when doing so is optional.

One student, Jessica, wrote, "The [tutor] was a huge help ... I will definitely be using this tutoring service often! Thank you for encouraging your students to use this resource." Anna stated, "Wow this program was great. Tutor was able to break down for me step by step what to do. They were able to ask me which method I wanted to use [for factoring]." And Wei noted, "The tutor used a different method ... to solve the problem. This was different from what I saw in the video. I found that this method made me see another way to solve the problem."

As a second step, I distributed a summary of those comments to their classmates, hoping to encourage those who had not yet tried NetTutor or reaching out to me via WorldWideWhiteboard.

As a third step, midway through the course, I posted a self- reflection assignment online. The assignment asked students to think about and answer four questions intended to identify what's going well and what could be going better as well as what could I do better and what could they do better to achieve their goals in taking the course. The responses were positive. Students reported that they liked online support because it enabled them to get assistance on their terms and schedule. They felt they understood the material more, which lead to improved confident and better grades.

Unfortunately, given the limited sampling size and other variables, I can't really draw any conclusions about whether any single support resource makes a difference in increased student success. Among students who ultimately earned a D or F in the course, none had participated in tutoring support, whether from NetTutor or on- campus even though we offer support services for free to students. Those unsuccessful students had not asked me for assistance, either.

Yet I keep in mind that a vast majority of the students did access tutoring support and passed the courses. And next time I teach a course, I will make it a required (not optional) assignment to use NetTutor, with the goal of boosting the percentage of students who continue to use the service.

My conclusion to the second question is that student who participated in tutoring support did appreciate it. I think part of the problem is that seeking out tutoring is analogous knowing you need to exercise. I know if I exercise, I will be healthier, lose weight and have more energy. But too often, for most of us, we focus on just what we have to do to push through to the next task — often overscheduled and frequently overwhelmed.

One challenge we have is to educate students to think of tutoring as a must- do, not something for which they don't have time. I firmly believe that once students are familiar with online tutoring and online whiteboards, they will tend to make use of those services through to graduation. Along with increased interactions with their professors, tutoring can help students identify strategies that work for them as students and in their careers.

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