

## Recommendations and guidelines for tutors using online synchronous learning environments (OSLE)

Drawing on our findings from the [Palatine study](#) and our experiences (both within the study and when working with our students) we offer recommendations and guidelines regarding implementation and use of an online synchronous learning environment (OSLE) for learning and teaching. This guide sets out:

- Key recommendations;
- Tutor guidelines for introducing and using an OSLE tool.

Guidelines for students are available in a separate guide:

<http://www.qmu.ac.uk/palatine/documents/LearnerGuidelines.pdf>

### Key recommendations

The key recommendations presented here include: familiarisation with the technology, rationale for using the OSLE, approach to learning and teaching, organisation, and etiquette.

#### 1. Familiarisation with the technology

During the study, tutors and learners were frustrated by the technology; problems were exacerbated by lack of tutor knowledge of how to use the OSLE and how to help troubleshoot for their learners. Training must be provided for both tutors and learners and a simple user guide provided. Critically tutors need time to experiment with all the functionality of the OSLE including breakout rooms, archiving and sharing desktops until using this functionality becomes routine. Ideally support departments should organise virtual drop-in sessions for tutors to practice using all the functionality.

Tutors also need guidance, case studies and exemplars of good practice in how to use the tool and all its features. Tutors readily grasped the potential of OSLEs in supporting one to one or small group sessions focusing on academic and/or pastoral support but our study showed that the OSLE had potential to be used in more diverse ways to support learning and teaching such as rehearsals and individual reflective diaries and tutors will need exemplars of this. Tutors who have already used OSLEs could be recorded outlining how they have used an OSLE and provide hints and tips.

#### 2. Rationale for using the OSLE

Tutors need to articulate clearly, and on a regular basis, the benefits of using the OSLE for learners in meeting the educational outcomes of their programme of studies. It cannot be assumed that learners will instantly understand the benefits for them of using the OSLE and in some cases the OSLE may be seen as an intrusion or a barrier to learning. Learners will also want to know why the OSLE is being used as opposed to tools such as Skype with which they may be more familiar.

#### 3. Approach to learning and teaching

The OSLE challenged our tutors in the way that they worked with their learners: the OSLE empowered the learners and provided them with more autonomy, for example, the learners could decide when they wanted to meet with their tutors and what the sessions would focus upon. It also challenged tutors to:

- Be more flexible and adapt to the sometimes less than ideal environment provided by the OSLE;

- Re-visit their current communication skills which had been honed in a face-to-face environment and adapt for the OSLE. For example, tutors in our study felt that they needed to speak more clearly, slower, more precisely and more deliberately to ensure their message was conveyed;
- Be more open-minded about technology in learning and accepting that this is rapidly changing. For example, our tutors were aware that the OSLE would soon be available through i-phones and were considering how this will affect practice.

#### 4. Organisation

All OSLE sessions need careful preparation by the tutor. Tutors need to consider how much time will be spent on social discourse and also when and how they will change the focus of the session to the learners' academic work. This will differ according to learners, tutors and context.

In most cases, the OSLE will only be one of several e-learning tools that learners will use; for example, learners may use an ePortfolio or Virtual Learning Environment. Tutors will need to address how the other systems will complement the OSLE, for example, holding guides, asking for learners to post summaries of OSLE sessions in the discussions in a VLE. If there are face-to-face sessions, the tutor will also need to consider how they link with the OSLE session and ensure that the OSLE sessions do not replicate the face-to-face sessions.

Tutors need to consider specifically the:

- Amount of interaction between themselves and learners, as well as the amount of interaction between the learners without necessarily the tutor being present;
- Amount of time (if any) spent on presentation of materials by tutors;
- Management of group break-out sessions;
- Provision of materials to learners (where, how and when);
- Preparations for virtual visiting lecturers;
- Archiving of sessions (the role of archiving and how archives will be made available to learners);
- Management of sharing desktops.

Pacing is also essential as OSLE sessions can be more intensive than face-to-face and so shorter sessions will be appropriate.

#### 5. Etiquette

As with asynchronous learning environments, learners will require guidance in how they are expected to work in this environment. This will depend on the context, the way in which the OSLE is used, and especially in how the tutor approaches learning and teaching. For example, in the study two of our tutors liked a more formal learning environment and ensured that the students understood that their online sessions were about their work and although they were using a web 2.0 tool, that it was a tool for learning, not just chatting. For example, the tutor should decide if private chatting between learners is appropriate and if and when they wish learners to use other tools, such as emoticon tools, including "thumbs-off" and "thumbs-down."

## Tutor guidelines for introducing and using an OSLE tool

Guidelines are set out in the following sections: preparing to use an OSLE, and the first induction session,

### Preparing to use an OSLE

#### 1. Preparing to use an OSLE as a tutor

- Be as familiar with the tool as possible – make sure you know how to use it and what functionality it has before you begin using it with your students.
- Practice using all the functionality especially:
  - Breakouts rooms;
  - Uploading files;
  - Sharing desktop;
  - Using videos and web links;
  - Archiving.
- Talk to other tutors who have used an OSLE.
- Ask support departments such as Library, Admissions and Student Services if they would like to use the tool with your students especially if they are distance learners.
- Decide where you are going to be for the session – at work or at home? Ensure that it has a good direct Internet connection (avoid Wi-Fi) and is somewhere quiet and preferably quiet.

#### 2. Preparing your students for the OSLE

Contact students as early as possible with information about:

- How to access the OSLE e.g. this may be a website or an icon on your VLE;
- Usernames and passwords (if used);
- Details of how to test if their computer works with the OSLE. Most packages have websites to check this and will provide links if additional plug-ins are required e.g. Flash;
- The location of guides for using the OSLE which include a troubleshooting section if there are technical issues;
- The rationale for using the OSLE;
- Times of planned sessions throughout the semester;
- Archiving of sessions.

You could also provide examples of how you use the OSLE with students. For example, you could use an archive from previous sessions with your students, which shows you running an OSLE session (you will require the students' permission to use this archive).

### The first session: induction

#### 1. Prior to the session

- Prepare the OSLE. Decide which tools you will use and what level of access the learners will have to these tools. You may also be able to customise the OSLE including its background and layout.
- Upload a welcome PowerPoint slide which explains when the session will open, the duration of the session and your contact details.

- Upload other materials into the OSLE which you can easily access during the session.
- Set up a quiz for instant feedback.
- Organise breakout rooms.
- Add a note about where to find troubleshooting information about the OSLE.
- Be online 15 minutes before the session to troubleshoot if necessary.
- Be prepared to be flexible – if it doesn't work out because of technical issues, have a back-up plan e.g. revert to email, telephone, or other similar software such as Skype – and prepare the students for this eventuality. Also warn students that other students may have different connection speeds to them and they will need to be patient.

## 2. The session

- Regardless of whether students are having technical problems, it is essential to start on time. Provide details of technical support but do not start late because some learners are having technical issues and cannot access the OSLE. Archive the session and offer to help after the session has finished.
- Explain:
  - The purpose /rationale for using the tool as opposed to tools such Skype;
  - How the OSLE will link to face-to-face sessions (if appropriate) and with other e-learning tools such as your VLE;
  - The organisation of the session.
- Remind students who they should contact for technical assistance and where to look for instruction guides.
- Warn students that there can sometimes be a time delay – to be patient and not 'jump' in too quickly if they are using the microphone.
- Make sure that you set out any ground rules at an early stage e.g. will this be a formal area and are users required to take turns, or will it be used less formally, with spontaneity and interrupting permitted? Explain about the role of the chat – when do you want students to use it and why? If learners are using the microphone, how will they know when to use it and when not to use it?
- When using the OSLE with students for the first time, prompt with questions to get the ball rolling – students might be a bit self-conscious the first few times that they use the tool and may need teasing out rather than being put on the spot. Encourage interaction by:
  - Ensuring learners become familiar with the emoticons such as “thumbs-up.”
  - Using breakout rooms with a specific exercise for learners to complete and set a specific time for groups to return to breakout rooms and ask them to present their findings.
  - Using the quiz tool for instant feedback and evaluation.
  - Providing time for learners to ask questions.
- Be mindful of, and responsive to, students' needs – e.g. some may feel self-conscious and take longer to feel comfortable with this type of meeting; some may find long meetings tiring and require a 'break' – changing the pace or talking about social aspects for a few minutes can help here.

- Allow time for learners to chat without the tutor especially if they are distance-learning students and have group work.
- Archive the session and inform learners after the session through the VLE how the archive can be accessed. Some systems also allow chat to be circulated as well.