

TUTORING IN INTERNET-BASED COURSES

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Research Report

This paper presents the importance of the work of the tutor, the results of a qualitative survey on the role of tutors in Internet-based courses, and the results of a specific case study on an Internet-based course entitled "Launching a Great Small Business", offered by SEBRAE. The survey examines the function of tutors in an Internet based course, the techniques used, with emphasis upon those that were most successful, and the difficulties encountered. Lastly, it ranks the qualities required of tutors that perform such an important role in an Information and Knowledge-based Society.

Tutoring, Internet-based education, e-learning.

Introduction

Current conditions demand formal adjustments and new responses which traditional educational systems have not proven entirely capable of providing. People need constantly to acquire new knowledge and to engage in learning throughout their entire lives. It is no longer acceptable that an individual's education should be deemed concluded upon leaving school. Increasingly high levels of professional training are demanded at all levels, in the light of inexorable transformations in productive structures and of the consequent job mobility. (GOMES, 1997, p. 5, translated by the author).

Distance education, a non-conventional modality of teaching that has been around for several centuries, appears as an increasingly attractive alternative for attending to the needs of the Information Society. Thus, distance education is currently undergoing reexamination and has become the object of new strategic approaches aimed at providing responses to the requirements of modern society. New information and communications-technology resources have enabled a reinvention of distance education, imbuing projects with greater prospects of success, principally by incorporating the possibility of interaction between students and teachers, and among students. Thus, distance learning ceases to be an isolated and solitary activity and begins to occur in groups. According to LÉVY (1999),

... two comprehensive reforms are needed in education and training systems. Firstly, acclimatization to the provisions and spirit of open teaching and distance learning within the day-to-day routines of education. (...) The essential elements are,

however, to be found in a new style of teaching which, at the same time, favors personalized and collective network learning. In such a context, the teacher is encouraged to become an animator of the collective intelligence of groups of pupils, rather than a direct provider of knowledge. (p. 158)

The need for a new kind of educator

According to NUNAN (1999) and TAVARES (2001, p. 2), “although web-based teaching helps facilitate independent and collaborative learning, bringing it into harmony with a constructivist view of knowledge, (...) nothing inherent to virtual media is responsible for this.” Internet-based education may be provided in a most traditional manner, and this may not reflect the much-needed modernity that is the hallmark of quality education.

Thus, e-learning can only have the desired quality if the team of educators involved in the process is attuned to the new requirements and possibilities that modern education using state-of-the-art technology provides.

The Tutor

Teachers working with distance education methodologies are generally referred to as “tutors”. According to EMERENCIANO, SOUSA & FREITAS (2001):

it should be noted that the term ‘tutor’ has often been used indiscriminately. Frequently the term is used in a natural manner, with no major alteration in meaning. We need to ensure that employment of the term leaves aside the idea of a tutor as being ‘one who shelters, protects, defends, directs or has tutelage over someone’. For our purposes, the term ‘tutor’ means a teacher or educator. Both these terms are applicable to the system of tutoring through distance education. (p. 4)

It is in this sense that the term tutor is used in this paper to designate an educator that teaches distance-learning courses using the Internet; who relates to his pupils through pedagogical mediation and is responsible both for content and for issues relating to motivation and monitoring of his pupils. He need not necessarily produce the material, but he is responsible for its application and, consequently, for interaction with and among course participants.

According to FONTANA (2003, p. 1): “in distance-learning courses, the tutor performs a fundamental role, acting as mediator in the learning process of his pupils. The tutor must perform the role of monitoring and orienting his pupils in their constant quest for knowledge, enabling them to build their own learning processes, by promoting their autonomy and independence.”

The principal goal of the tutor is to train the student to work for himself, to think for himself, and to construct his own knowledge of the subject he is studying. (MEDIANO, 1988 & GOMES op. cit., p.3, translated by the author)

EMERENCIANO et al. (op. cit., p. 4) have stated that “the tutor is always someone with two essential characteristics: command of the technical-scientific content and, at the same time, the ability to stimulate course participants to seek responses.”

It is important that teachers should understand what being a tutor in Internet-based courses entails. But what happens in practice? Do all teachers involved in distance education projects fully understand the scope of the work?

NEDER (2000) remarked the following on the role of the tutor:

In distance education, interlocution between the student and advisor is exclusive. Paradoxically, despite the term 'distance', the teacher or advisor, needs to be in permanent contact with the pupil, by means of maintenance of a dialogical process, in which the surroundings, the course, expectations, achievements, doubts, difficulties, etc., all comprise dynamic elements of the process. (p. 99)

For a person educated in the traditional manner, and who has long worked as a traditional teacher, such change is no easy matter. The teacher is required to develop a series of new skills and behaviors. Change occurs gradually and steadily, and thus necessarily entails continuous learning-to-learn. Indeed, such behavior is required of everyone involved, be they teachers or learners.

According to HAETINGER (2003, p. 15 and 16) "many teachers find it difficult to understand teaching-learning processes that take place in ways that are outside their experience. Clearly, in order to be able to teach, teachers need to learn to learn."

According to KENSKI (2001) it is also necessary to ensure that professionals are imbued with critical capacity in relation to the adoption and use of technologies. The teacher needs to be in a position to transform the digital environment into a space that awakens interest and collaboration, unlike the isolation and alienation characteristic of most classrooms. The teacher needs to have sufficient methodological fluency to provide quality teaching, even if, to this end, he must reinvent his own notions as to the significance of teaching and learning.

With the emergence of Internet-based teaching, many people thought that this technological tool would suffice to effect teaching. Practice has shown that this view is seriously flawed. Participation of the teacher is indispensable for quality education, since it is he that must provide support and guidance for studies, and stimulate critical appreciation, independent study, and self-discipline on the part of students, and foster interaction and collective building of knowledge. CHALITA (2001, p. 68) reinforces this idea, stating that "the teacher will not be replaced, but the focus of his attention must change, as he ceases to be a mere facilitator of the knowledge-transmission process, to become an intervener and resolver of problems."

The teacher, in his capacity as pedagogical mediator, needs constantly to focus upon the pupil's learning process, and to realize that the pupil must be the center of the process, i.e., his role must be performed within a new paradigm that seeks to cast off the old teacher-centered approach.

Tutoring is necessary in distance education systems, principally since human contact is a key requirement of the teaching-learning process. It must be stressed that no single model of tutoring is readily available to be adopted, and each model will vary according to the context, and from one institution to another. The role of the tutor is different to that of the teacher in a presential teaching situation. Tutoring systems should be perceived as individualized and cooperative education, wherein the tutor assumes the role of the student's advisor, providing resources to enable him to learn in an independent manner, in pursuit of course objectives. The tutor's actions should aim to surmount obstacles to distance learning. In a system that employs new technologies, the work of the tutor needs to be based upon maintaining close personalized contact with the pupil, and providing support throughout the entire course. The

tutor, must also bear in mind that the pupil is studying alone. His guidance should focus upon aspects of knowledge, while assisting the pupil to achieve autonomy and the building of indispensable new knowledge for use in a world in constant change. The tutor is also the essential element for motivating the pupil to advance in the pursuit of his studies. (GOMES, op. cit., translated by the author)

The survey

In the review of the literature herein presented there is a consensus as to the importance of the tutor in distance-learning courses, and as to the importance of this educator's maintaining a posture and approach to activities that differs from that of the traditional teacher. Is this consensus shared by the professionals that work as tutors? Is this innovative form of tutoring what actually happens in practice?

In order to respond to the above questions and others that have arisen during the course of the work, a specific case was selected and subjected to qualitative research methodologies, with the aim of assessing the role of the tutor in an Internet-based course, while seeking to determine to what extent the tutor's profile influences the work, and examining what techniques were used, the difficulties encountered, and how the learning process and the development of the tutors themselves takes place.

The course, entitled "Launching a Great Small Business" [*Iniciando um Pequeno Grande Negócio*] - IPGN, has been available since May 2001, on the Internet, and is targeted at people who wish to upgrade their conceptual technical and instrumental knowledge on entrepreneurship, finances and the market. The course is free for participants and has a duration of two months, with a class load equivalent to thirty hours. The target public for the course is people from throughout Brazil who wish to open a business, and that have at least concluded Secondary Schooling.

The course tutors, also from throughout Brazil, were recruited from among the instructors that taught the presential version of the course. The tutors were all specialists in the course content, but had had no prior experience of educational work using the Internet. For this reason, all of them received training from SEBRAE prior to taking on the task of tutoring.

From September to December 2003, when the survey was carried out, the course had a staff of thirty-five tutors. All of them responded to the survey. Even though the content and methodology were defined by SEBRAE, each tutor acted in a different manner, with the result that there was significant variation in the number of pupils that concluded the course in each class (50% to 88%), and in the results of evaluations by the pupils. In view of this situation, it can be deduced that one of the principal factors responsible for these variations were the tutor and his approach to his work, which provides us with an important clue in our investigation of the issue. Among other factors that influenced variation in the numbers of pupils concluding the course were, for example, the state of origin of the participants.

It is worth stressing that the team of tutors interviewed had worked together for almost two years, had participated in initial training, and had undergone continuous training focused upon development of pupil-centered educational activities. Unquestionably, this influenced the results of some of the items.

The data collected were examined in the light of eight categories: definition of tutoring, characteristics of the tutors, training and profile of the tutors, functions, techniques used, difficulties encountered, continuous training, and characterization of the pupil by the tutor. This paper will concentrate on only three of these categories:

1. **Functions:** Much has been said about the complexity of the tutor's work; of his principal function as a pedagogical mediator and also an inspirer, who must constantly seek to motivate pupils to deepen and expand their knowledge. In the light of this, it is important to know how the tutors of the IPGN course perceived their functions.

2. **Techniques used:** In order to understand the role of the tutor in the course in question, it is essential to examine the techniques used. This category contributed to a practical overview of the work and its true application.

3. **Difficulties encountered:** the process of transition of an educator from presential teaching to Internet-based tutoring depends upon the way he worked in the presential teaching environment, i.e., the extent to which the teacher was already conversant with modern educational techniques. Moreover, understanding the difficulties encountered is an essential requisite for understanding the work as a whole.

Functions

As the work of a tutor is comprehensive, consequently, his functions are diversified. SEBRAE defined the following list of functions for tutors in Internet-based IPGN courses:

1. Establish an environment that fosters learning.
2. Guide and orient the pupils.
3. Promote participation and integration among pupils and the community.
4. Monitor the performance of pupils in relation to a course schedule.
5. Communicate with pupils in appropriate language.
6. Use encouraging and positive words.
7. Animate the class by stimulating discussion while reinforcing course content.
8. Interact with the group and maintain a presence.
9. Value knowledge and experiences brought by pupils, encouraging them to develop new mental attitudes.
10. Utilize different ethical strategies to stimulate learning and course conclusion, taking into account the various channels for learning.
11. Pursue dialogue and encourage permanent contextualized and significant dialogue among the pupils.
12. Present leading questions.
13. Assume a humble and confident attitude.
14. Provide individual monitoring, when necessary .
15. Carefully read all e-mails within the Community, responding to them or stimulating debate, when appropriate.
16. Respond to doubts and to e-mails from pupils within 24 hours on business days.

The tutors proved to be very closely aligned with the functions established by SEBRAE, and the majority responded to the afore-mentioned survey by referring to all or some of them. Other tutors responded by rephrasing the functions established, and there were practically no points of conflict.

The best thing about the responses from tutors was that on no occasion did they reflect a totally antiquated view of teacher-centered education, based on transmission of knowledge.

The tutors were asked whether they spent more time on the clarification of doubts relating to content, on motivational issues, or on other issues. Answers to this question varied considerably. The most often cited item was motivational issues, which received 37% of the responses; whereas 31% said that it all depended; 18% claimed that there was a balance between motivational issues and clarification of doubts; and 14% responded that they spent more time on other issues.

The discrepancies of these answers as to how tutors allocate the time dedicated to tutoring indicate that tutors do not all work in the same way. This has a good side, since in a heterogeneous group of tutors there is the prospect of intensive exchanges of experiences, and the different techniques can contribute toward growth of the group as a whole. Another positive point is that if there is no single way of working, it becomes easier for the tutor to adapt to each different group, and to attend to the specificities of each. On the other hand, the downside of this argument is that there is no standard definition as to the best way to perform tutoring for an Internet-based IPGN course.

Techniques used

Both issues relating to motivation and issues relating to in-depth treatment of the course content are important, which is why special attention will be devoted to each separately, beginning with motivation. Tutors were questioned with respect to which of the techniques used produced the best results, with regard to motivation. The sending of motivational messages and texts to boost self-stimulation was the technique most often cited as a successful way of motivating pupils, and 60% of the tutors stressed their importance.

The second most cited technique was to be always present and to provide a swift response to doubts and questions raised by pupils, and 34% of the tutors reported that they had used this technique with positive results.

The third most mentioned technique, reportedly used by 26% of respondents, was stimulus by means of challenges of the most varied types. In fourth place came two techniques of considerable importance, mentioned by 17% of respondents. They are: level communication with the pupil, starting from his reality; and debate within the community to stimulate collaborative learning.

The importance of the collaborative learning community was mentioned both in relation to pupil motivation, and to the deepening of learning, as will be discussed shortly. One of the motives for stimulating the community to encourage participation in the course is that it reduces the feeling of loneliness on the part of pupils, as is mentioned by KENSKI (2003), along with his assessment of the tool:

As the place in which flows and messages are shared for the diffusion of knowledge, the virtual learning environment is built on the basis of stimuli for the conducting of collaborative activities, in which the pupil does not feel alone, isolated, engaged in a dialogue only with a machine or with the (also virtual) instructor. Quite to the contrary, by building new forms of communication, the virtual school space is presented by the establishment of *on-line* communities in which pupils and

teachers can be permanently engaged in dialogue, mediated by knowledge. (p. 55)

Two similar techniques, mentioned by 14% of the tutors, consisted of showing interest and paying individual attention to each of the pupils in the class.

From the testimony of these tutors, it becomes clear that even in the case of distance learning, the pupil need not feel isolated or lonely, since he has a tutor always at hand, monitoring his work, and also his classmates.

With respect to techniques used to deepen the student's learning, the tutors mentioned various approaches, and the great majority use more than one. In first place came discussion within the Virtual Learning Community. This technique was successfully used by 60% of respondents. The results of the survey indicate that the majority of tutors are in line with this indication. However, ideally, in the light of the importance of this tool, all tutors ought to have mentioned its utilization.

In second place came stimulus for research, through leading questions or requests, and was mentioned by 31% of the tutors. In third place came the sending of texts and messages relating to and complementing the course content, mentioned by 26% of those interviewed. Suggestion of complementary reading lists was mentioned by 19% of respondents and, also mentioned by 19%, the use of the Chat tool. The course's virtual library was mentioned by 14% of the tutors.

Other techniques cited were: correlation of theory and practice, stimulus for the search for answers, setting of challenges, case studies, interviews, individual monitoring of a business proposal, presential meetings, collective reinforcement of the main concepts of the course, promotion of reflection and stimulus for the preparation of a business plan.

Difficulties

With respect to difficulties encountered in carrying out the work of tutoring, all the tutors were unanimous in stating that initially they had, indeed, faced difficulties. As was reported by TAVARES (2000) some teachers found it easier than others to migrate to online tutoring. This depended upon to what extent the teacher had adopted a pupil-oriented approach.

From an analysis of the responses submitted by the tutors, in general, it would appear that the main difficulties identified in the work with the first group to perform the role of tutors were: command of the educational environment and, also, anxiety at embarking upon a new and uncharted work; the so-called 'initial vertigo'.

The various other difficulties mentioned included: lack of command of the instructional techniques, interaction with e-pupils, lack of knowledge of open and distance learning, fear of the unknown, insecurity, lack of experience, adapting language, lack of effective guidance on the part of project coordination staff, motivation of the pupils, pupil absences, stimulating the learning community, managing time of access and dedication to the course, and management of messages received from pupils.

Even after having surmounted initial difficulties, and having acquired some experience in the role of tutoring, the great majority of tutors admitted that they still faced some difficulties. The greatest of these was how to deal with

absences and dropout, since a significant portion of pupils fail to start the course, give up, or are unable to finish in the allotted time.

Other difficulties mentioned by the tutors were: maintaining discussion with the community, technical weaknesses in the educational environment, diversity of interests and objectives on the part of pupils, finding efficient strategies that can be applied to all classes, time dedicated to the course, the use of available tools for tutoring, the chat tool, and lack of sufficient knowledge of the theoretical bases of distance education.

Conclusion

Being a tutor in Internet-based courses is a complex and extremely important activity. The theoretical references made explicit herein, and an analysis of the data from this case study provide a firm basis for this affirmation.

The role of tutors in Internet-based IPGN courses is very broad and encompasses a significant diversification of functions, activities, responsibilities and knowledge. It is apparent that the actions of tutors in IPGN courses must focus upon two major areas: motivation and support for conclusion of the course, and deepening of the content and clarification of doubts, both individually and collectively. This leads to the conclusion that the tutor of an IPGN course needs to be a good educator in the broadest and most complete sense of the term, aside from being a specialist in the course content.

Based upon material obtained from interviews with tutors, there follows a listing of the most important qualities of a tutor, from the standpoint of the tutors interviewed. The items are listed at random, and no order of priority has been attributed to them.

1. Encourager – a tutor needs to motivate pupils to complete the entire course, and deepen their knowledge.
2. Animator – the tutor must breath life into the Virtual Learning Community and stimulate pupils to participate actively in the process.
3. Know not only the course content, but also the technical tools involved in the educational environment.
4. Be committed – to be truly involved in the learning of the pupils, and to demonstrate this attitude.
5. Be a good communicator – communication is of fundamental importance in the process, principally written communication. This must be clear and objective, without being harsh, it must draw the pupils in and captivate them.
6. Be present – demonstrate, by means of effective participation in the community and with the pupils, providing swift responses to questions raised, in a manner that relates to the pupils' context and reality.
7. Be persistent – not be discouraged by moments of difficulty, since working with innovation is always challenging.
8. Know how to balance individual attention and collective attention of the class, fostering team spirit among the group, while providing support for each participant in individual concerns.
9. Have empathy with the group and with each individual pupil.
10. Be an educator, in the full sense of the word, concerned with the four pillars of education, as defined by UNESCO.
11. Be a challenger – instigate and challenge the pupils, motivating them in the search for responses and solutions

12. Enjoy exchanging experiences – this is a key characteristic, whereby the tutor teaches by learning, and learns by teaching.
13. Know how to relate theory to practice and the reality of his pupils – thus facilitating learning and making knowledge significant for the pupil.
14. Guidance – knowing how to identify moments when pupils need guidance and providing it in the correct form.
15. Help pupils, providing them with support at moments of difficulty.
16. Enjoy working with people and groups – it is an illusion to believe that just because the pupils are not physically in the same room as the tutor, that it is not important to enjoy working with people. Indeed, it could be more important, since contact with each pupil may even be more intense in an Internet-based course than in a presential course.
17. Facilitator of the pupil's learning process. The outmoded idea that a competent teacher is one that complicates the course content needs to be completely discarded and abandoned.
18. Respect the autonomy of the pupil – monitoring should be effected without overly invading the pupil's independent space, especially when he has opted for distance education.
19. Be a friend and companion to the pupils – under no circumstances ever adopt an air of superiority before a group of pupils.
20. Be constantly concerned with your own learning, and pursue it in a continuous fashion.

Two other necessary qualities for a tutor are also stressed by the writer, even though they were hardly mentioned by the interviewees.

21. Knowing how to listen – in authentic communication, knowing how to listen is of fundamental importance to the tutor. This quality is especially important because teachers, generally speaking, are not in the habit of listening to their pupils, or of genuinely seeking to understand them.
22. Be creative – when working with innovation, with new technologies, or with an approach that is completely different to the traditional process, creativity is the key to dealing with new situations, it being essential to extract what is best from each challenge. By being creative, the tutor also stimulates creativity among his pupils.

Addition of these two last qualities finds support from such authors as HAETINGER (op. cit., p. 17), for example, who states that: "the principal task of this new teacher is to LISTEN. Various authors claim that this is the great revolution in the role of the teacher, and that it is listening that makes him capable of acting as an agent for change."

FREIRE (1996) also stresses the importance of the teacher's listening to his pupils, especially because it is by listening that he learns to speak to them. This author goes into greater depth as to the real meaning of knowing how to listen, and says that: "listening must obviously go beyond the simple hearing capacity of each person. Listening, in the sense discussed herein, means permanent availability on the part of the subject who listens, thereby providing an opening for the speech, the gestures, and expression of the differences of the other." (p. 135)

Of all these, indubitably, the most important quality is the tutor's broad and comprehensive focus upon the actual learning of the pupil. This, after all, is the true focus of the entire process and the final goal of educational work.

Essentially, tutoring is not much different to other types of teaching in presential courses. However, the work of a tutor in an Internet-based course entails certain peculiarities inherent to the media, and indeed to distance education as a whole.

In concluding this paper, the author offers her own statement of the role of the tutor:

A tutor is a teacher who animates and facilitates education, using the Internet, with the aim of fostering real learning on the part of pupils. He must be fully conversant with the educational methodology, the tools used in the educational environment, the Internet, and the course content. His approach must be creative, participative and friendly, while constantly attending to his own learning and enhancing his work from day to day.

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