

THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF VIRTUAL TUTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: VOICES OF THE TUTORS

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Abstract:

The text presents a survey of novices virtual tutors in Institutions of Higher Education in central region of São Paulo state, one public and one private. The research sought to characterize the initial formation, academic and professional career and the difficulties encountered in the exercise of the teaching of virtual tutors. It has been analyzed the responses to a questionnaire with open and closed questions applied to four virtual tutors who worked in an educational institution of a higher education and four virtual tutors of a private institution. The results indicate poor conditions of work for which the virtual tutoring is being held, between them, the overload of activities, the accumulation of virtual activities with the presence teaching activities, the difficulty in organizing time and space for the implementation of tutoring, lack of dialogue between teaching staff, the difficulty in maintaining the participation of the students and low salaries. The subjects of the research show that elimination of the accumulation of virtual teaching and presence teaching and the proximity and participation of the tutor in planning for virtual activities are factors that can contribute to improving the conditions under which their work is performed.

Key words: distance education, virtual tutoring, teacher working conditions.

Introduction

Tutoring as a teaching method originated in the fifteenth century at the university, being used as a religious orientation to students. Later in the twentieth century, the tutor took the role of advisor and companion of academic

work, and this meaning incorporated into current programs for distance education.

Within a context of a range of skills of the virtual tutors, many of them very well arranged by Maia (2002, p. 13) in Brazilian Guide on Distance Education, the literature seems to point to an enhancement of their importance and increase of its social responsibility, which may open opportunity for a further discussion of the role of the tutor in distance education, as well as the conditions under which such work is performed.

The research and methodological procedures

The research presented here aimed to reveal the conditions of teaching work done in virtual tutoring in higher education institutions in the region of São Carlos (SP). Data were collected from November to December 2008. As specific objectives, the researcher sought to characterize the virtual tutor on the initial education, academic and professional career in Distance Education, and know the difficulties encountered in implementing their activities in virtual tutoring.

The study subjects were selected from the circle of professional life in distance courses in higher education institutions in which the researcher acted as a virtual tutor, one of them public (UAB – Universidade Aberta do Brasil) (BRAZIL, 2010) and the other a private institution.

A questionnaire containing 67 questions, including multiple choice and open answers. The questions were grouped into 14 categories. They are: I. Characterization of the subjects, II. Socioeconomic Profile, III. Academic Education, IV. Continuing Education, V. Education for tutoring in Distance Education, VI. Professional Teaching Work, VII. Professional career in presence education, VIII. Professional career in distance education, IX. Leisure, X. Computer technology, XI. Pedagogical practices in classroom courses, XII. Pedagogical practice in distance learning courses, XIII. Conditions for the exercise of teaching in presence education, XIV. Conditions for the exercise of teaching in distance education.

The processing and data analysis were done in Excel 2007, a software of the Office suite.

The profile of the virtual tutor and their working conditions

The tutors who participated in the survey were 08 from different discipline groups, among them 02 male and 06 female. Their ages ranged from 26-40 years. Teacher education was distributed equally among 04 bachelor and 04 from teachers formation. They are: Education, Accounting, Agricultural Engineering, Computer Science Degree and Music Education. The maximum degree of the teachers was distributed in: 02 graduated, 04 masters and 02 doctors.

The teachers were included in three professional categories: a) one teacher contract in public university, b) three FNDE (Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação) (BRASIL, 2006) scholarship by UAB and c) four teachers employed by the CLT (Consolidação das Leis Trabalhistas). The average time dedicated to tutoring was also distributed in three categories: a) one teachers with dedication of up to ten hours, b) four teachers with ten-twenty dedication hours, c) three teachers with twenty-thirty dedication hours.

A first aspect analyzed is the level of teaching experience in virtual tutoring. The average years of service in virtual tutoring ranged between one and three years. When dealing with the life cycle of teachers in the presence education modality, Huberman (1995) states that the first three years are the initial phase stage, characterized as entry into teaching. Within this cycle, it is common that insecurity, instability and the need for survival may promote a number of difficulties in carrying out their tasks.

Although there are no studies yet on the life cycle of professional teachers in virtual mode, it is possible to ask whether the lack of work experience can also promote difficult on implementation of the activities of some of these tutors. Moreover, among the tutors surveyed, five reported having experience in classroom teaching between six and fifteen years. This experience in classroom teaching was highlighted by four of these tutors as an important condition for the exercise of virtual tutoring. Therefore, from the data presented in the questionnaires, the experience with classroom learning may have contributed to the overrun initial phase of these tutors.

Among the categories of problems faced by tutors interviewed, one of the most difficult activities of tutoring is to maintain the virtual presence of the

students on the course. The low student participation in activities is a problem reported by three tutors, two of them from a private institution and one from the public institution. Whereas students' motivation to continue studying, despite the difficulties of every kind that may arise for them, is one of the functions of traditional tutoring (UNED, 1988, apud LITWIN, 2001, p.96), this report may lead to the assumption that motivate students to learn is one of the most important skills that the virtual tutor should learn and develop to obtain the success on their work. Emerenciano, Sousa and Davis (2001) emphasize that the tutor is always someone who has two essential features: the field of technical-scientific content and at the same time, the ability to stimulate the search for an answer by the participant. Aretio (2006, p. 142) states that motivation is strongly influenced by the quality of the comments made in feedbacks for the work done by students. For students it is important that he clearly establishes that their studies will allow the attention to their professional or personal needs increasingly.

However, it is necessary consider that the motivation is related to the traditional perspective of teaching in a distance education, based on the idea of transmission of knowledge and lack of presence of teachers, and that the teaching is done by the materials or self-sufficient packages (LITWIN , 2001, p.96). In the current pedagogical perspective, the tutor assumes the role of teaching that creates proposals for activities for reflection, supports its resolution, suggests alternative sources of information, offers explanations, and promotes understanding processes. Therefore, the responsibility of the tutor is widening, where it establishes themselves professionally within the field of teaching. It is important to note that the extra responsibilities on the tutoring were reported by one of tutors of a private institution interviewed as a difficulty factor of work in tutoring.

Contributing to the difficulty of the work reported by one of the tutors of the public institution appears the lack of participation of the tutors in the planning process of the course. The participation of the tutor in planning the course should be viewed with great importance by the managers of distance education. Litwin (2001, p.106) argues that we should acknowledge that the intervention of the tutor can improve the pedagogical proposal in which it was designed by a project, program, or teaching materials.

The research also found among the issues that generate the difficulty in the work of tutoring, is the knowledge of the tutor on the course content offered by Professor that produces the course, reported by one of the tutors of the public institution. The domain of platforms tools for distance education also was reported by the tutors of the public institution. Further difficulties also appeared to evaluate the student, highlighted by two tutors of the public institutions. In this context it is important to reflect on the fact that the higher education, received by teachers, does not always adequately prepare them to face the problems observed in direct contact with students.

In the presence education, the lack of preparation of the teachers to take a class is a matter of abandonment of the profession even in developed countries such as Belgium, Switzerland, Hungary, Finland, Denmark and Ireland (GARCIA, 2009, p.19). Currently, teachers' formation to work with the Information Technologies and Communication, and especially to work with technologies to support distance education are virtually nonexistent in teacher formation in Brazil.

The lack of dialogue between teachers and between teachers /tutors was reported by two of the tutors from a public institution interviewed. The feeling of isolation from fellow teachers in presence education is also one of the reasons why a large number of teachers leave the profession (HORN, STERLING, Y SUBHAN, 2002, apud GARCIA, 2009, p. 16). Studies indicate that the opening of dialogue between teachers and the work as a team can be one of possible paths to success in terms of education. According to Garcia (2009, p. 24), the possibilities of improving the teaching and learning is enhanced when teachers start to make questions, collectively, about ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find new ways to respond to differences and conflicts, and engage in professional development.

According to the research conducted by MILL, SALLES and SANTIAGO (2007), most of the issues related to conditions of work in distance education are about to the overload of work, including in this dimension the excess of activities, the amount of paid time to undertake such activities, the high number of students under the responsibility of the tutor, and the low value of hour-class. These issues emerged in the responses to the question: what causes you discomfort or pain in the work of tutoring? The main cause of disturbance

reported in the research was activity overload, reported by seven of the eight participants, along with the accumulation of distance and presence teaching. This last factor was reported by two tutors from the public and two from the private institution.

The research revealed that the major difficulty of the work of the tutor is to monitor the individual tasks of students. This fact was appointed by three tutors, two of them from a private institution and one from the public one.

The overload of activities had the effect of excessive working hours, reported by five of the tutors interviewed. The main period used to develop tutoring activities varied. Among them, three reported to use the night, and three reported to use any time of day. Only one tutor said to work only in the morning and one tutor said to use morning and afternoon. The tutoring work also extends into the weekends, because five of the tutors said to work Saturday or Sunday.

The conditions under which telework (telecommuting) should be implemented require the adequacy of the telecommuter to a number of factors, identified by the ETO (European Telework Online) says Fetzner (2001). They are: plan or set of tasks, organizational context, the domestic environment (family and home), personality, experience and preferences of the person.

Some experts on this subject point to the possible deterioration of the professionals in the scenario presented to the contemporary worker. For Zylberstajn (2007), contemporary economic activity can produce certain types of externalities. This concept (Mankiw, 2007, p. 204) is presented as a matter of negative effects in terms of costs, which are produced by productive actions that affect the workers, without the opportunity to question by the workers or stop them. These instances are as dangerous to the workers as problems of environmental origin, since they provoke the deterioration of health by overwork. The work of virtual tutoring, or telework, is also entered in this context. The difficulties of separation between work hours and hours dedicated to the rest, leisure or family living, as pointed in the research developed by Mill (2006, p. 146), may lead to some moments of confusion. This situation may cause socio-psychological damage to the worker.

The excessive number of students in virtual classrooms was also highlighted as a factor that complicates the job of the tutor in private institutions.

In the model adopted by the public entity in which part of the tutors interviewed work, the average of students per tutor is about 25, while in the private one, the salary of the tutor is based on the number of the students per class, and this mean that the higher the number of the students, the higher is the salary. This is specially a problem when the salary is calculated using the number of students under the responsibility of the tutor, and the low value of hour-class. When we reflect about the preparation of the tutor to deal with large amounts of virtual students, Litwin (2001, p.108) points out: their particular questions, their individual productions, their understanding problems, their natural expectations, “is a problem that we are not prepared to face”, she says.

On the issue of salary, half the tutors said receive up to three minimum wages. Three of them reported receiving 05-10 minimum wages and only one reports receiving more than 10 minimum wages. Importantly, the teacher with better pay is from higher education of a public institution. The data pointed to the assumption that the tutor often uses telecommuting as additional income, as stated by Rehder (2007), as a consequence of the poor remuneration of teachers. This item was reported by two tutors of the public institution and one from the private one. In the tutoring at UAB, the tutor receives R\$ 600.00 from FNDE (Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação) in the form of scholarship, without labor rights such as vacation or guarantee fund for length of service, for example.

Virtual Tutors reported the following factors as important to improve the conditions of their work, as the data presented in Figure 1 shows. According to the virtual tutors, the most important factors for successful performance of work in tutoring are the time allocated to the implementation of its activities, and the support of the teacher responsible to the course. This fact was related by the tutors from the UAB that implements a model that combines a teacher with a group of tutors. Also in importance as an ideal condition for the exercise of tutoring, cited by seven tutors, is the didactic material, which should be adequate to the proposed discipline, as well the student interest in learning and the motivation for teaching, that means, the tutor must also have an interest in acting and being motivated for tutoring. The factors also cited by the tutors were: experienced teaching in presence courses, conditions for the student to perform their activities and the reduced number of students in the classroom.

The factor less cited by the tutors was discipline or bad behavior of students in the classroom.

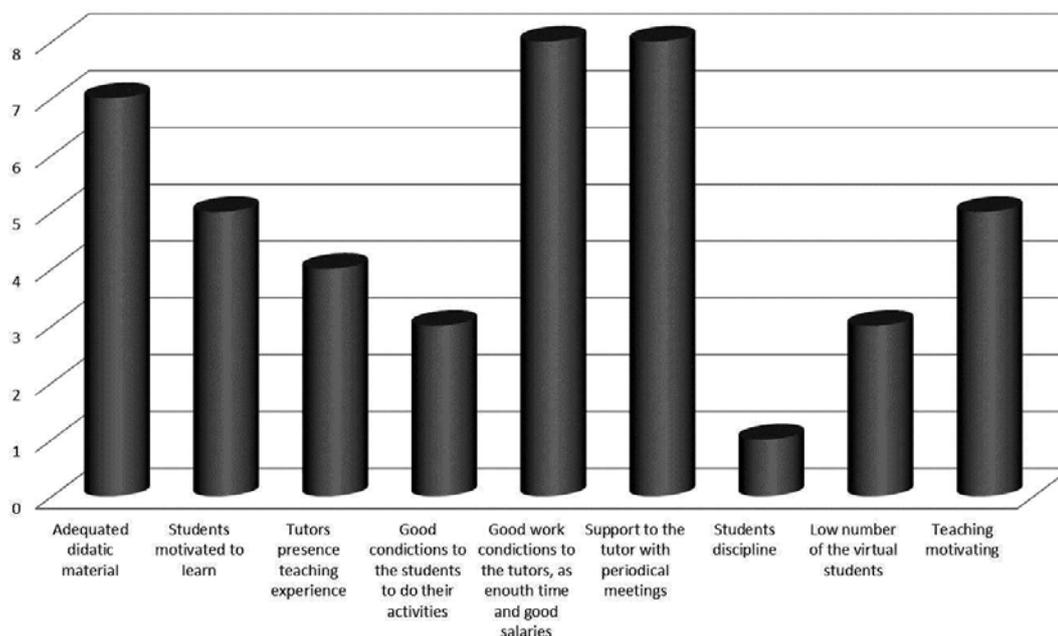


Figure 1- Ideal conditions for the exercise of work in tutoring

Finally, the research shows that despite the working conditions in virtual tutoring are still far from ideal, the tutors surveyed said they had good expectations about the future of this mode of education. When asked about expectations for the future of work in virtual tutoring, six of the tutors said that they want to continue tutoring, while two of them, from private institution, have doubts and said they did not want to return to this type of activity. It is important to relate that, among the teachers interviewed, five said that had chosen the profession they wanted to work, claiming that they intended to be a teacher when they chose the graduate course.

The tutors who said that they wanted to continue to work whit virtual teaching related different expectations. According to them, the experience with the virtual teaching performance and the continuing education courses in the area are factors that can contribute to improving the work of virtual tutoring. The hope of maintaining the enthusiasm, the desire to get away from presence activities to increase the dedication of tutoring, and increase of the opportunities to work as a tutor with better salaries in virtual work were cited as very important.

Final Considerations

The teachers work in virtual tutoring occupies an increasingly prominent position in the educational scenario. This happens by the large expansion in higher education in Brazil, in recent years, in distance education. The skills needed for teaching in virtual education demands of this professional a series of new learning and activities, many of which he was not prepared, bringing with them new challenges, from professional formation to the conditions under which the work may be performed.

The data presented in this study revealed the problems that are cause for anxiety, exhaustion and abandonment of the work of virtual tutoring. By pointing out the important factors for successful pursuit of work in tutoring, this research reflected the voice of the tutors, showing possible paths for improvement, starting with the support of the teacher in charge of discipline, spatially in the case of UAB, and getting better design time to activities, among others. Improve the conditions of this professional is a process that contributes to get the quality in education, that can be combined with the personal satisfaction of the virtual tutor.

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