

TUTORIAL PRACTICES ANALYSIS IN AN ON-LINE UNDERGRADUATE COURSE

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ABSTRACT

The blend with the new times overcomes archaic methods and accommodations and, in this context, Distance Education (DE) appears, allied with the education and anchored in new information technologies and communication (NITC), to promote and democratize the knowledge. The search for learning quality and pedagogical environment interaction is evidenced by a new mediator figure, intermediating content and learner. This study presents an analysis of the role, characteristics, competences and the needed attributes to mentoring, aiming to reach success in an on-line undergraduate course at University of Brasília (UnB). The achieved results in this work indicate some procedures that, if adopted in mentoring, corroborate to DE courses' success.

Keywords: *ED, Mentoring, Undergraduate on-line course, NITC.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The gradual construction of intelligence becomes persevering with stimulation and challenges in a continuous way. Today, the educator needs to have decision power, this way, leaving the listener, the copy and report producer role that are handed in traditional classrooms and going to a new knowledge search procedure in a creative and stimulating way, that instigates him/her to win new challenges to discern solutions to problems that are surrounded, supported on knowledge basis.

DE is an educational modality that is becoming a highlight and is conquering an important position in the contemporary society educational scenario. At the same time, the resources, both human and technological, permeated by New Information Technologies and Communication (NITC), are capable of facilitating the learning and need to follow this transformation.

A human resource example that must be rethought and worked on DE is Mentoring, whose role consists, among many, in protecting the students in their knowledge journey and guaranteeing their presence in the on-line environment. DE's success is measured, somehow, by the evasion rates presented in courses. Many are the reasons that lead a student to abandon a distance course, however, when such reasons can be overcome, the teacher-tutor becomes a key element and has a considerable portion of this process.

This work presents an empirical and literature study about the importance of mentoring in an on-line undergraduate discipline, evidencing its real contribution to the success of distance courses, as well as, serving as a reference to the implementation of DE courses. It is also intended to present a proposal to build an active, conscious and engaged mentoring on the synchronous and asynchronous tools usage.

This research was guided by the following guiding issue: "Which attributes are visualized in a mentoring performance, in students, monitors and tutors' perspective in a distance undergraduate discipline at UnB. Which traces in mentoring those groups observe in common and what is its connexion to identified aspects in the theoretical literature?".

The presupposition of this work is to analyse the importance of mentoring and its role and to guide, direct and supervise the teaching-learning process, contributing to the distance courses' success. In establishing the

contact with the student, the tutors complement their teaching task utilizing synchronous and asynchronous tools. The tutorial support also make the intercommunication of elements (teacher/content/student) presented on a distance modality, being, therefore, the key element of on-line courses' success, fact evidenced by many theorists.

CEAD (2007c) mentions that, facing the new times, a new learner is inserted into the DE context, searching time and space flexibility, with a profile that impose many challenges on people responsible for planning and offering distance courses, with attention to the following premise: the students confront problems and adult situations (personal and professional), that compete with their studies and can cause abandonment; doesn't have fixed schedules to study, many times study at nights, after a long workday; has little daily time to study, when there is time, it is just for a little time everytime; being frequently interrupted while studying; the study places also varies and, many times, are improper to study and reflection.

Maia (1998, apud MACHADO & MACHADO, 2004) accentuate that, in the virtual scenario, the connection teacher-student is, in the pedagogical imaginary, a dominant. The scenario makes tutoring a key point in a distance learning system, as well as, highlights that the tutoring contribution in a distance course, in a dichotomous sense, conducts the student to success or to abandonment.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 The origin of tutoring

The tutoring was originated in the XV century in the university, in which it was used as religious orientation to the students, with the objective of enforce faith and moral conduct. Posteriorly, in the XX century, the tutor assumed the role of guiding and accompanying the academic work, and it is with this focus, that was embodied to the current distance education programs. (SÁ, 1998 apud MACHADO & MACHADO, 2004).

Some authors highlight that the guiding idea gives greater connotation of the definition of the tutor's task, defining tutor as a “guide, protector or someone's defender in any aspect”, while the teacher is someone who “teach anything” (LITWIN, 2001:93 apud MACHADO & MACHADO, 2004). The word

professor comes from the word “*professore*”, which means “the one who teaches or profess a knowledge” (ALVES; NOVA, 2003 apud MACHADO & MACHADO, 2004).

2.2 Demystifying the tutor's function

Gutiérrez and Prieto (1994, apud MACHADO & MACHADO, 2004) designated the DE teacher as a “pedagogical advisor”. Those authors emphasize that the teachers' function is to do the connection between the institution and the student, following the process to enrich the student with their knowledge and experiences. The tutor's characteristics are mentioned as: being capable to communicate well; possessing a clear learning conception; dominating the subject content well; facilitating the construction of knowledge by the student, through reflection, experience and information exchange; establishing empathic relationships with the student; searching the philosophies as a base to his/her act of teaching, and constituting a strong instance of personification.

2.3 The interactivity and the tutor

According to Gagné (1985, apud CEAD, 2007a), the instruction is nothing more than a set of events externally planned and drawn to support the learning process. He also highlights that the internal process of learning can be supported and influenced by external events, called events of instruction. These events are: get learners' attention; inform the learner of the instructional objective; stimulate the recall of prior learning; present the learner with stimulus or contents; provide learning guides; provoke the performance; provide informative feedback; evaluate the learner's performance and increase retention and transference of learning.

2.4. Tutor's competences

Blandin (1990, apud OLIVEIRA, DIAS & FERREIRA, 2004) defines four big areas in which the competences of a teacher (online or not) need to be developed: the technical culture (minimum domination of the use of information and communication technologies, applied to education); the communication competences (interpersonal communication, that can be mediated by using computerized support or not); the capacity for working with a method (systematizing and formalizing instructional and didactic procedures); and the

capacity for multiply (present your knowledge and experiences “translated”, so that others can learn them and benefit from them).

2.5 The tutor's role

Emphasizing the tutor's important contribution to the success of distance courses, the tutor's role still needs to be clarified, to guide the student to his/her process. Niskier (1999 apud MACHADO & MACHADO, 2004), cite that the tutor's role is: to coment the students' work; to correct students' works; to help them understand the course materials through explanations and discussions; to answer questions about the institution; to help the students plan their works; to organize study circles; to provide information by phone, facsimile and e-mail; to supervise practical works and projects; to update information about students' progress; to provide feedback to the coordinators about course materials and students' difficulties; and to serve as an intermediate between the institution and the students.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research subjects were 168 (a hundred and sixty eight) students, 13 (thirteen) monitors and 13 (thirteen) tutors, participants of the undergraduate on-line discipline “Advanced Topics in Health Promotion 1”, offered on the second semester of 2008 by the Nursing Department from the University of Brasília (UnB), to all undergraduate students as a free module. As a means of obtaining the information questionnaires were elaborated with closed questions and using the Likert Scale, including topics like: target audience profile, discussions about the discipline, characteristics, competence and tutoring profile. The survey was accessible on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Moodle, and as an analysis method of the data the software SPSS (version 11.0 for Windows) was used for statistical treatment of data.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

4.1 Student's analysis

In the data collection, it was verified as the student's profile that: 63% have between 21 and 25 years old; 52% are females and 48% are males; 50% study or study and work; 50% of the students belong to the knowledge area of Life Science; 40% are seniors and 33% of the students are at least in the 5th

semester; 92% of the students are taking more than four disciplines; 76% of the students have very good computer skills; 64% of the students access the discipline more than 2 to 3 hours a week; 64% access it on fridays; and 62% had the first contact with an on-line discipline.

4.2 Tutoring's analysis

Standardizing the designation of "Tutoring" to the instructor's team (tutors and monitors) was sought and, in the data collection, it was observed that: 46% have more than 26 years old; 77% are females; regarding the occupation, 58% study and work; 88% belong to the knowledge area of Life Science; of the 13 tutors, 56% are master's or doctorate's students; of the 13 monitors, 56% are in the 5th semester up to the last semester; 69% have very good computer skills; 92% of the tutoring access the discipline from 2 to 3 hours a week; 42% access it on fridays, saturdays and sundays; and 65% had the first contact with an on-line discipline.

4.3 Results' discussion

In response to the guiding question formulated in this research, common traits were observed in both samples studied, that corroborate as positive attributes to the performance and to the tutoring operation, being:

- students (80%) and tutors (100%) agree that the complete filling out of the students' profile (with picture and information) contributes to the process of interaction in distance disciplines/courses.
- it was found that the problem in students' learning is not exclusively the learners' responsibility, being the instruction team in control of conducting the teaching/learning process.
- students (77%) and tutors (85%) were unanimous that the constant and convenient feedback within 48 hours, from the instruction team, avoids evasion and contributes to the students to leave virtual isolation.
- the motives for communication students/tutors were observed: pedagogical, technical, subject content and personal doubts, in that priority;
- as an interaction strategy mentoring/student, it was verified: forum feedbacks, Moodle messagings, any feedback given within 48 hours and lastly, the e-mail.

- students (85%) and tutors (100%) were unanimous that greater interaction between those groups strongly contribute for the success of a distance course/discipline.

- as a parameter for verifying the satisfactory tutoring performance, according to some theorists from this subject, it was observed as a highlight:

- a. as adoption of proactive features by the tutors, mentioned by Gutierrez and Prieto, it was emphasized: to be capable of good communication; to establish empathic relationships; to facilitate the construction of knowledge; to dominate the content well; and, finally, to have a clear conception of learning.

- b. regarding the instruction events, mentioned by Gagné, it was evidenced by the samples: to obtain the attention; to give informative feedback; to evaluate the performance; and to inform or clarify doubts;

- c. regarding the areas of competence of the tutors, pointed by Blandin, it was emphasized by the two groups: the technical culture; communication; work method; multiply knowledge; and all the competences;

- d. regarding the tutoring role pointed by Niskier, it was reported: comment on the students' works; correct exams; to mediate between the institution and the student; and give feedback to the coordinators, in that order of importance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Product of validated study, this work propose in the planning and offer of a distance course/discipline, the adoption of the following premises:

- be implemented as an evaluative activity, the filling out of the Moodle student's profile, with picture, adress, two telephone numbers and other needed information to the students' identification in the group, aiming greater interaction and blend of the group;

- special attention to the DE learner's characteristics, it was observed that the use of interactive and informal forums (escaping from the course's theme) proposing the discussion of diverse subjects, the creation of the “Café Forum”, for example, promoted “breaking the ice” and the blending of participants, in this way, facilitating the creation of group work.

- it is extremely important during the formation phase of the tutoring group, seeking to level technical-pedagogical knowledge, to propose the creation of a training course for tutors, and in its absence, to elaborate a Moodle procedure manual or tutorial (only shown for tutors) about the team's performance and proceeding, avoiding throughout the course an accumulation of messages between the teaching team.

- it was a strong point in the discipline to create an overall schedule, fully meeting the activities and event's deadlines by all members, and it was sought to discipline the performance of students and tutors, considering that each students' activity were closed for posting exactly on the deadline, whereas the teaching team had its own deadline to evaluate and make comments.

- it was analysed that the ideal number of students for monitoring and evaluation by the teaching team was 10 (ten) students per tutor or monitor, aiming a personalized treatment; and

- everyone agreed that the students' learning problems are not theirs, this monitoring is the tutoring's exclusive responsibility.

In this research, it was found that working the isolation of the learner with greater interaction, convenient and constant feedback, within 48 hours after any kind of questions/doubts, was a highlight point. It was evidenced and caused differentiation between classes, that the amount of tutoring access, in the interaction with the students, is directly proportional to the largest number of excellent grades (SS) and, this indicates, that the active tutoring is related to the success of distance courses, as specified in the final result of the eight classes from the discipline, with special attention to classes F, G and H (more interactions/accesses and SS grades), highlighted in charts 1, 2 and 3.

Quantity of access of the tutoring per Class

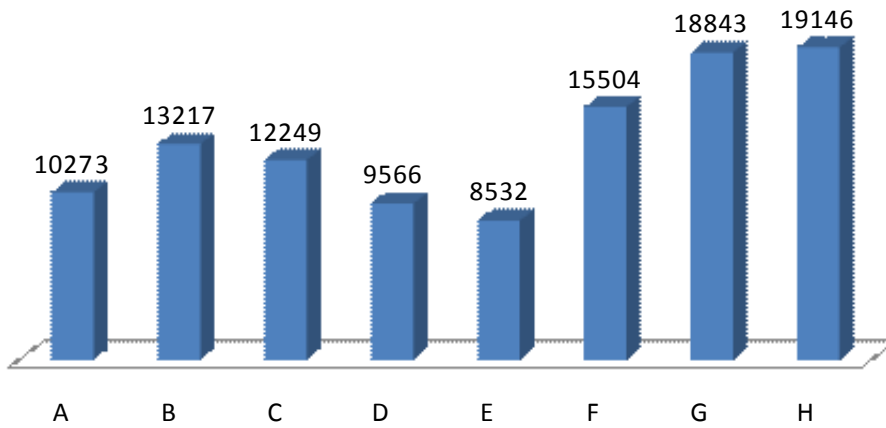


Chart 1 Quantity of access of tutoring in the 8 classes of TAPS1 discipline

Access percentage of tutoring per Class

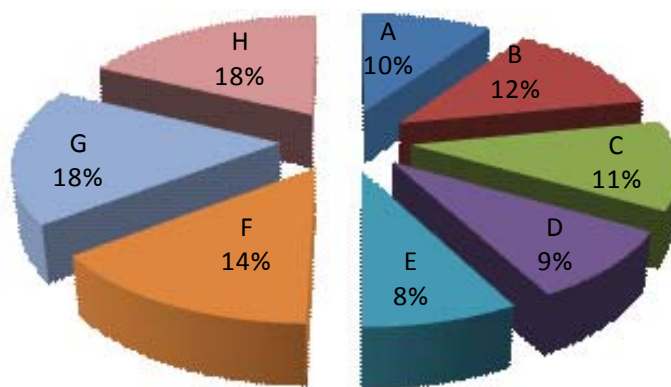


Chart 2 Access percentage of tutoring in the 8 classes of TAPS1

SS grades per Class

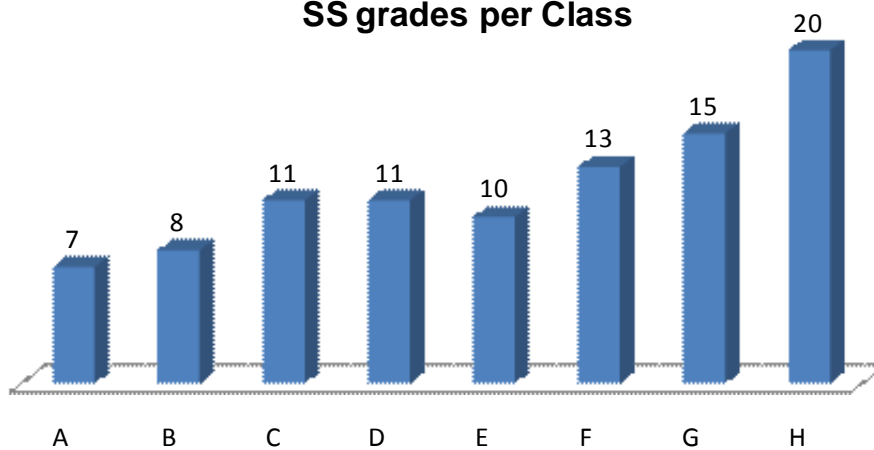


Chart 3 Total of SS grades, in the 8 classes of TAPS1 Discipline.

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