

THE UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENTS ON THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND TUTOR IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Category: Research and Evaluation
Educational Sector: Higher Education
Nature of Work: Research Report
Class: Scientific Work

ABSTRACT

The literature has often discussed the different roles that teachers and tutors take on in virtual learning environments (VLE). These discussions include the apparent dichotomy among the duties performed by these pedagogical mediation agents. Based on data collected from six distance learning classes for a degree in mathematics at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), this text aims to discuss the understanding that students have of the role of teachers and tutors in online distance learning environments, using relevant theoretical references.

KEY WORDS: Distance Learning. Teacher's role. Tutor's role.

INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that Distance Learning (DL), driven but not determined by the progress of ICT has changed the education scenario in Brazil. Several courses are implemented and approved each year and the number of students seeking this form of education has increased visibly in both the public and private formal education institutions.

In this context, some authors (Levy, 1999; BELLONI, 2003; ZUIN, 2006; CORTELAZZO, 2008) discuss what role is to be assumed by the teacher who works in DL, as well as the new functions required, which demand coping with real challenges. However, what we see is that the student, who is an integral and fundamental part of this network, has no such clarity about the roles of the teacher nor understands how the action of the teacher can interact with their own learning process.

What kind of mediation is exercised by the teacher in a virtual environment? How is this function seen by students who, in most cases, see the tutor as being the sole responsible for the mediation or see him as being responsible for transmitting the traditional course content? Assuming the role of a learning mediator, the role of a distance learning tutor has been the subject of discussions within DL. In practice, we recognize that a distance learning tutor is considered to have a very important role in the pedagogical mediation, which ultimately sets up a situation of dichotomy between the roles of a (distance learning tutor) and the role of teacher. This situation creates some confusion for students who can not clearly see the limits that define the different functions when these professionals are carrying out those duties. Nevertheless, we consider it relevant to reflect upon the distance learning tutor.

Accordingly, the aim of this text is to discuss the understanding that students have of the role of these educational agents that assume different functions from the traditional on-site teaching, acting as teachers and tutors in distance learning. For that purpose, data was collected from the freshman students studying for their degree in Mathematics UFJF within the Open University of Brazil (OUB), while they were studying the Reception Module (RM), an introductory and optional course from the referred institution's distance learning courses. The RM aims to develop skills that allow students to have autonomy while proceeding with their studies.

THE ROLE OF TEACHER IN DE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

The highly technological scenario at the present time, which provides everyone with information from all areas of knowledge through the web, requires teachers to rethink their ways of working in a constant movement of (re) signification and reflective actions, irrespective of which modality of education they operate in.

Lévy (1999) stated that the role of the one who teaches the "teacher", can no longer be to disseminate knowledge. Other means do this more effectively. On the teacher's role in the context of technology, he says:

They should move to encourage learning and thinking. The teacher becomes a facilitator of the collective intelligence of the groups that they are responsible for. Activities will focus on the monitoring and management of learning: inciting an exchange of knowledge, relational and symbolic mediation, the piloting of personalized learning paths etc. (LÉVY, 1999, p. 171).

Regarding DL, there are findings that require a teacher to have a different profile:

Not every on-site teacher has what it takes to serve as a teacher in distance learning. It was further observed that the lack of teachers to work in distance learning is not due to technological problems, easily remedied through practical and theoretical training. The problem is in the pedagogical preparation and training for teaching (CORTELAZZO, 2008, p. 318).

These quotations refer us to the inevitable change in the functions to be performed by teachers, which also implies a change in posture. Such changes may, in some way, be represented by the "transformation of teachers from individual entities to corporate bodies" (BELLONI, 1999, p. 81). This author provokes us to think towards the transformation of teachers to this "collective entity" - in the current context of our country whose culture has greatly enhanced the image and television media – it would not be helping to strengthen an authoritarian imagery. This authoritarianism was gradually replacing the pedagogical authority. Therefore, this change in the image of teachers can be a trap: to make them a kind of service providers by inserting them into a process of reification. Corroborating this idea, Zuin (2006) associates the image of the teacher to audiovisual resources by calling them "the performer of audiovisual shows" (Ibid., p. 947), such is the authority that the television packages have.

Images of people and objects, converted to fleeting icons, locked in a titanic struggle with each other with the intention of staying for a few

more moments in our memories before being sprayed and replaced by images of 'new' icons. And if this logic seems to prevail when faced with media images, would it not be much pretension to believe that the teacher was exempt of becoming one of these icons? - When the contents of their courses are broadcast both on television and on the computer screen (ZUIN, 2006, p. 948).

These words of Belloni (1999) and Zuin (2006) lead us to reflect on the need for a more careful analysis of the roles of teachers and tutors as being responsible for mediating virtually pedagogical relationships with their students.

In the complex task of distance learning different subtasks appear from those existing in on-site teaching, such as: the "author", which selects and prepares content classes, the "educational technologist" (*instructional designer*), who organizes the training material, the "graphic artist", who works on visual art and the end of the text / material, the "developer", etc.. (BELLONI, 1999). However, what we see is that there is some uncertainty about the role and functions of the teacher who works in DL.

Corroborating the ideas above, Cortelazzo (2008, p. 316) summarizes the new roles of the teacher in the context of DL:

In this new model of distance learning, the teacher assumes new roles beyond 'teaching'. These roles relate to authorship and mentoring, that is, teachers write books for their courses, go to a studio to give their synchronous televised class to interact with students who are at their on-site support terminals and at the tutoring center, and interact, as the guardians of knowledge, with students who are spread across the country.

Note that the author uses the phrases "tutor" and "guardian of knowledge" to describe some of the roles of the teacher. The range of tasks may be the cause of the existence of different terms / classifications related to the same functions. Regardless of the nomenclature used for the teacher's role, as well as the various tasks assigned to it according to the DL model, it appears that the success of programs of distance learning is associated with its success in bringing together the educational agents through pedagogical mediations (ZUIN, 2006), a movement of negation to the dictatorship of the images and the valorization of the teacher's pedagogical authority.

TUTOR AND TEACHER: THE SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THEIR ROLES

Regarding the nomenclature used to describe the teacher who works in DL (also called a tutor, trainer, facilitator etc.) Fichmann (2007) brought some interesting reflections in a lecture given at the 13th International Congress on Distance Learning held in Curitiba in September 2007. For her, a "tutor is one who is tasked to safeguard, protect and defend someone". The teacher in DL sometimes assumes this role. However, she considers the term *Mediator Trainer* most appropriate, considering that a trainer "is one who educates, perfecting" and a mediator "is one who mediates or intervenes". Thus, a *Teacher Trainer Mediator* who "facilitates, coordinates, advises, and instigates reflective and critical processes", within a "co-formative process in virtual communities of learning and practice".

According to the "Benchmarks of Quality for Higher Distance Learning" there is a need for a multidisciplinary team to structure and run courses in this modality. This multidisciplinary team with functions of the planning, implementation and management of distance learning courses should be composed of three occupational categories: teachers, tutors and technical administrative personnel.

Based on this document, the teachers' skills are:

a) to establish the theoretical foundations of the project; b) to select and prepare all the content curriculum articulated to the pedagogical procedures and activities; c) to identify the goals relating to cognitive skills, abilities and attitudes; d) to define the bibliography, videography, iconography, audiograph, both basic and supplementary; e) to develop teaching materials for distance learning programs; f) to perform the academic management of teaching-learning, particularly motivating, guiding, monitoring and evaluating students; g) to continuously assess as a collectively participating professional in the higher distance learning project (BRAZIL, 2007, p.20).

Likewise, skills are established for both distance learning and on-site tutors. Distance learning tutors work from their institutions, mediating the educational process with geographically distant students and are referenced to from their decentralized on-site support terminals" (Ibidem, 2007, p. 21). Their main function is to clarify questions through discussion forums, the web, telephone or other means.

The distance learning tutors also have the responsibility to promote spaces for collective construction of knowledge, select support material and give content theoretical support and, often, part of their duties is to participate in the teaching-learning evaluation processes, along with teachers (BRAZIL, 2007, p. 21).

On-site tutoring, on the other hand, implies a call in at the site terminals, at pre-established times, meaning the on-site tutor should know the course's pedagogical project, the course material and the specific content that is under their responsibility, in order to be able to assist students in developing their individual and group activities by encouraging the habit of research, answering questions regarding specific contents, as well as the use of available technologies. They participate in mandatory on-site activities, such as assessments, practical classes in laboratories and supervised internships (BRAZIL, 2007). The technical administrative personnel are not discussed in this text because it does not constitute an object of this study.

THE RESEARCH: IN SEARCH OF INSIGHTS

In this exploratory study, a qualitative approach, we aim to understand how students from a distance learning course perceive the role of teachers and tutors. To enable this, the research data were collected from six teams entering the undergraduate program in Mathematics at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), part of the OUB – during the first semester in 2010. Students enrolled in distance learning courses at this institution are studying an optional subject called Reception Module (RM), whose main objective is to bring the

student to understand the dynamics of a distance learning course in order to continue studying the course independently.

In this process, the student has the support of the technical support from the Center for Distance Learning (CDL) at that university, with the on-site support terminal where he applied with all the inherent trappings, as well as the distance learning and the teacher for the subject. In the case of the course concerned (mathematics), the teacher was responsible for six classes with an average of 40 students each, with a distance learning tutor for each class and an on-site tutor at each terminal. At the end of the RM, which lasted one month, the teacher was asked to assess students' progress. In this study we were interested in a particular item composed of five questions entitled "The support and guidance to the studies," as shown below:

As for the support and guidance to the studies 1 2 3 4

5. The performance of the distance learning tutor encouraged to overcome difficulties, cooperation and autonomy to study
6. The role of the on-site tutor stimulated the difficulties
7. I received accurate information regarding the schedule and implementation of activities
8. I was clear as to the role of the teacher in the Reception Module
9. I felt supported by the teacher during the Reception Module

Table 1: Item "The support and guidance to the studies"

The 1-4 scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*:

| | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| strongly disagree | mostly disagree | I agree | largely totally agree |

Table 2: Rating Scale

Of the 228 students enrolled on the course: 17 never accessed it, 5 students sent the wrong files, 1 student sent a blank file, 3 students submitted files that they had not opened, 56 did not participate and 146 sent the files with the data we collected obtaining quantitative representation; in other words, we worked with about 70% of students enrolled on that course. The analysis that follows also considers the item "Suggestions and Criticism," open space for the improvement of future versions of RM. To nominate students, we use the initials of their names in order to preserve their identities.

Analysis of the issues

Question 5 - The performance of the distance learning tutor encouraged to overcome difficulties, cooperation and autonomy to study

Of the replies, nearly 100% agree largely or completely on the importance of the role of the distance learning tutor to overcome the difficulties. However, some student statements are as follows: "My suggestion is that the tutor's answers to our questions are sent to us much more quickly and that there is a shorter time between the posting of our questions and tutor's response" (A.P., student). Or: "One suggestion would be a quicker response time from the tutor in answering questions. In my case it was two days" (L.M., student). Although there are few negative manifestations in relation to the role of distance learning tutor, we realize that there is such dissatisfaction with the role they play in supporting students. It is noteworthy that according to the educational model of

distance learning at UFJF, the tutor in distance learning "is responsible for the direct contact with students during the learning process of a subject or set of subjects" (TAKAKURA *et al.*, 2008, p. 4). However, each coordinator / teacher agrees on a deadline with their tutors for returning activities and tasks on the basis that they should not usually exceed 48 hours. These "comments" from the students are forcing us to question the anxiety that normally pervades the behavior of students in distance learning courses.

Whereas the comments that follow show how the role of the mentor is important for a student's performance and link with the university. *"Before giving my suggestion, I have a compliment to pass on: the interest shown to us, students, both in the opening class and in Reception Module was definitely great because I felt completely supported by the tutors when I needed them"* (C.K., student). *"At present, I still have no suggestions, but I have always been able to contact my tutor when I need him to pass on the UFJF material"* (student TS). *"So far I have nothing to complain about the reception module. The tutor has helped me and cleared up my questions"* (student MA). Clearly, the tutor in distance learning, in practice, performs the work of pedagogical mediation, which is essential for the development of the student.

Question 6 - The role of the on-site tutor stimulated the difficulties

Regarding the role of on-site tutors, the number of students who disagree with their performance starts to increase. That is, for a significant percentage of students - about 18% - the role of the on-site tutor is weak, and revealed in statements like: *"I think that on-site tutors could help more and be more present at their terminals, in order to clear up any questions whenever they come up"* (A.M., student). *"Regarding the on-site tutor, I felt they were a little unprepared because when we students sought information about an activity, we sometimes did not get the appropriate information. One example was how to download the CmapTools program and how to send the files."* (I.E., student).

According to the UFJF model, the on-site tutor "is responsible for giving local support for the development of the necessary skills to perform distance learning activities". (TAKAKURA *et al.*, 2008, p. 4)

Taking into consideration that for the vast majority of students entering the undergraduate program in mathematics, it was their first experience with online learning, obviously a number of difficulties would manifest before them, especially at the beginning of the course, as illustrated in the statements above. And, accordingly, a certain expectation was created about the role of the on-site tutor, since the same would be responsible for assisting the students in achieving their individual and group activities, encouraging the habit of reading, researching and offering support for the use of available technologies. We believe that this kind of activity with the students could greatly contribute to develop autonomy to their studies.

Question 7 - I received accurate information regarding the schedule and implementation of activities

In relation to the receipt of information, few students expressed themselves as being dissatisfied (about 4%). However, it is important to emphasize the

importance of establishing and publicizing a schedule setting out deadlines to complete activities for a course in distance learning modality.

We can assign this function in our course (the guide through schedules) to the distance learning tutor. So, once again student satisfaction is enhanced with the pedagogical agent, and the enhancement of their role in the process of teaching and learning *online*.

Question 8 - I was clear as to the teacher's role in the Reception Module
Question 9 - I felt supported by the teacher during the Reception Module

These questions (8 and 9) will be discussed simultaneously. About 96% of students reported were clear as to the role of the teacher. However, with regards to feeling supported by them, the dissatisfaction increases to 7%. And, accordingly, students' statements appear like this: *"I wish the teacher would be more present during the module for better interaction with the day to day routine and the content"* (C.S., student). Somehow it seemed paradoxical that students are clear as to the role of teachers yet they feel dissatisfied with their performance. This leads us to infer that students do not really understand that one of the teacher's roles is to support the work of the distance tutor. Thus, we must say that even the distance learning tutor does not seem to really understand the role of the teacher. Distance learning tutors have expressed the following questions: *"The student's activities get corrected by the tutors. And teachers, what do they do? "*

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although an exploratory study like this does not allow us to draw conclusions, we believe that some issues raised help us to think about doing DL. The teacher-student relationship and understanding of their roles is crucial in whatever type of education. Therefore, we believe that there should be investment in universities in order to qualify those involved in the process. Teachers, tutors and managers must make a concerted effort to make this really happen and might bear fruit towards an education without distances.

Therefore, assessment tools that seek to collect information from students on their courses are of paramount importance. They should not, however, be applied only to comply with the aim of evaluating. They should rather serve as tools with the intention of improving the support and guidance given to the students' studies.

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