

# THE DISTANT TUTOR AND DE EFFECTIVE MEDIATION OF EVALUATION DISCUSSION FORUMS

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## **ABSTRACT**

The proposal of this work is to describe the importance of the Distant Tutor formation with emphasis on the effective measurement of the evaluation discussion forums, considering that it is the asynchronous tool that provides greater interactivity. Ten participation criteria are presented either quantitative or qualitative and, also, evaluation criteria, all validated and approved in graduation courses, in the at distance modality, of Universidade Santo Amaro (UNISA). (Santo Amaro University). Established the criteria, it is believed that the best form to capacitate Distant Tutors to reach the proposed objective, is on the Distant Tutor Formation course, based upon a complete manual by means of evaluation discussion forums, commented simulations, among other interactive activities, in which the most diverse situations found In Distant Tutor day to day are presented, in the exercise of his/her role, in the Virtual Learning Environment.

**Key words: Discussion Forums; Distant Tutor; Interactivity; Knowledge Collaborative Building.**

## **1. Initial Considerations**

The purpose of the present work is to introduce the importance for the Distant Tutor formation stressing his/her emphasis on the effective mediation of evaluation discussion forums, considering that it is the asynchronous tool that provides greater interactivity. When hired to act as a Distant Tutor many are this professional challenges. How to be affective without being paternal, how to mediate forums and chat sessions without monopolizing the discussion, how many postings are considered as ideal, how to conduct a personal learning without permitting the group importance be perceived, among others.

The most part of Superior Education Institutions focus their capacities in the usage of adequate tools, for example, how to create a forum, how to post a grade and etc. A short manual for fast consulting is what has been evinced, when in reality, the Distant Tutor has to be trained for the various situations, for more different types of students and respective positioning.

In front of so many stalemates, one believes in the elaboration of a specific manual, that in dialogical language shows to the Distant Tutor, through commented simulations, how he or she should act to be effective in his/her mediations. Certainly it is known that there is not a ready recipe, but what one pretends to present is a very interesting work model, either to whom conducts a discussion forum and, mainly, for whom is conducted.

The work presents UNISA's innovative experience in elaborating the Tutor Manual (Santo Amaro University, 2012) <sup>[1]</sup>, focused on the simulations commented in the evaluation discussion forums, coordinated by this article author. The Distant Tutor Manual is the basic bibliography for the Distant Tutor Formation course mandatory for all tutors when hired.

## **2. Evaluation Process**

The courses of graduation bachelor, superior of technology and more, the licentiate of the Superior Education Institution that the author of this article works are offered in quarterly regimen in the at distance modality: January,

April, August and October. Quarterly each module makes available to the students three or four disciplines, depending upon the course specificities.

To evaluate the students development in the module disciplines, in the Learning Virtual Environment (LEV) three evaluation activities are made available each quarter: a Discussion Forum, an Activity with Intermediary Feedback, that may be made of exercise lists, researches, summaries, digests etc. The student that wants to know if he/she is in the right path, he/she is oriented to deliver the activity in advance. The Distant Tutors precede a first evaluation. If the student is incurring in any type of error, he/she is oriented to do the due adjustments and deliver the new version until the activity closing date. The strategy that gives the option to the student of an intermediary deliver favors the student autonomy, as said by Lima, Silva and Paiva (2010) <sup>[2]</sup> the student needs to be stimulated to develop his/her autonomy to guarantee the conduction and rendering effective his/her learning. The body of evaluation activities, also contemplates an Electronic Activity, which comprises ten multiple choices questions.

The evaluation process is concluded by the Presence Test, which contemplates 50% of objective questions and 50% of discursive questions. It is applied in an integrated form, or rather, all the module disciplines in the same day. The test correction system, totally realized by the Teachers Responsible for Disciplines and the respective Distant Tutors, is interactive and personalized. The system allows comments in the test questions, alerting the student for his/her mistakes, thus avoiding that they are repeated.

### **3. Rules for Participating in Evaluation Forums**

Either the student or the Distant Tutor has to know in advance the participation and evaluation criteria. It is very common the student question about how many times he/she should participate to obtain the maximum grade. The Distant Tutor, by his/her turn, when evaluating the forums should have, besides the qualitative criteria, the minimal quantitative evaluation criteria which collaborate in the grade attribution. The minimal quantitative criteria corroborate with Carlini and Tarcia (2010) <sup>[3]</sup> when affirm that the interaction should be

privileged, that the student perceives that the access to the tool should be constant.

Ten criteria are presented here as indispensable for a successful forum conduction. Number of participants, text extension, quality, periodicity, researches, citations, cordiality, Portuguese Language usage rules, among others should be made clear to the participants of a forum, as systematized in the following table:

1. Each student should participate at least 3 times. The number of participations, the quality and pertinence will be responsible for the grade attribution. The participation should be coherent with the proposed theme.
2. To be feasible the interactivity, the 3 participations should not take place on the same day. Reply and rejoinder should be allowed.
3. Each participant should start the forum positioning him/her in relation to the initial questioning. Only after this he/she will comment other colleagues' participation. All the participations should be justified.
4. The interaction could happen through discussion student-student, student-tutor, tutor-student, teacher-student and student-teacher.
5. Avoid placing too long texts, for the participants could be discouraged and give up the reading.
6. The research is important to support the argumentation, however, it is intended to know the participants opinion, and, from there move towards the construction of knowledge. Always present your opinion regarding the theme.
7. In case of copying a passage from internet and/or books do not forget to mention the source consulted.
8. Be cordial with teachers, tutors and colleagues.
9. Coherence, grammatical concordance and right spelling are also considered.
10. Only the messages posted within the activity realization period will be considered for grade.

Table 1 – Evaluation Forums Participation Rules

In accordance with these rules, in the evaluation forums there is a minimum number of participations and not a maximum, so the more the student participates more he/she will be competing to obtain the maximum grade. The grade will be attributed for his/her three best participations in different days.

Three are the punctuation criteria:

1. The student positioning regarding the proposed subject, it could be worth up to 0.5 point if in accordance with the rules above.
2. The participations discussing the colleagues' postings, since duly justified, can be worth up to 0.5 point each if in accordance with the rules above.
3. If the postings occur all in the same day, the student will lose 0.2 point in each one of the latest participations, since the interactivity and knowledge construction process was impaired, since it did not occur during the period.

Table 2: - Discussion Forums Punctuation Rules

Regarding the maximum punctuation criteria it is considered, here, 1.5 point and are ruled in a mediating evaluation which agrees with Silva (2006) <sup>[4]</sup> when says that this type of evaluation requires the critical follow up of the student participation process, the possibility of new and different challenges which allow his/her free expression and the recording of his/her performance and discoveries such as frequent dialog among the participants.

Many are the concerns in the moment of attributing grade to the students. Some students present more ease in interacting and other prefer only to observe and read the colleagues and tutor postings. So, it is up to the Distant Tutor to give and to respect this freedom, including the student's silence that Mattar in Litto e Formiga (2009) <sup>[5]</sup>, classify as "vicarious interaction", the one in which the student observes the discussions and debates, without participating in them. Nevertheless, as the superior education institutions have academic calendars to be followed, time limits are required from the students. Thus, the Distant Tutor has to have ability to understand the student and bring him/her back on time for the interaction and discussion environment with his/her colleagues and tutor.

#### **4. Mediation of Evaluation Discussion Forums**

The Discussion Forum allows the interactivity, but do not need to be in real time. The student will participate in the best schedule in accordance with his/her availability. It is the tool that allows de knowledge collaborative construction, confirming <sup>[3]</sup> when affirms that the objective of this tool should be centered in the exchange of experiences, knowledge and perspectives.

For a forum to be considered satisfactory and fulfill its function, the Distant Tutor participation has to be active, in the sense of mediating the students' participation, stimulating them, not only with "Congratulations", "Go ahead" or similar things, but commenting their postings. It needs to be clear for the student that his/her postings were read and considered important for the group. However, as Maia and Matta (2007) <sup>[6]</sup> affirm the tutors cannot completely dominate the discussions (thus restraining his/her students freedom) nor be absent (giving the impression of abandoning the students).

## 5. Mediations Simulations

To start the mediations simulations in an evaluation discussion forum we show here the proposed theme and the opening message for the discipline Economics, which will be used as an example.

<p>Dear students,</p> <p>Bellow the initial questioning for our Evaluation Discussion Forum:</p> <p><b>The interest rate reduction is good for the economic growth of the country?</b></p> <p>To be successful in your participations, read the criteria in:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Support Material → Evaluation Activities → Discussion Forums</p> <p>I am counting on everybody participation!</p> <p>Virtu@I hugs,</p> <p>E-learning Tutor Jacqueline Lameza.</p>
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Table 3 – Example of Evaluation Forum Opening Message

Following, some simulations of students' participations will be presented, as well as the mediation done by the Distant Tutor and his/her respective analysis.

Student	Distant Tutor
<p>Hi, Jacqueline!</p> <p>With a lower interest rate the people can buy more, and so the industries will have to increase production.</p> <p>Hugs</p> <p>João</p>	<p>Dear João,</p> <p>Besides a lower interest rate, what else will be necessary to stimulate the corporations to increase production?</p> <p>Virtu@I hugs</p> <p>E-learning Tutor Jacqueline Lameza</p>

Table 4 – Example of Distant Tutor's Mediation

In this moment the student posting and the Distant Tutor's posture are evaluated. The student João was initially assertive, but his answer was oversimplified not reaching beyond. Instead of criticizing him the Distant Tutor will conduct him to reflection, since there really is no guarantee that only lower

interest rates will conduct to production increase. João will have to search more. The Distant Tutor here, fulfilled her role, she conducted and oriented the student so that the construction of learning occurs.

Students	Distant Tutor
<p>Hi, Tutor Jacqueline!</p> <p>As the Teacher commented in the Satellite Class it is going to be easier to buy a car and/or a LED TV on installments. The installments get lower.</p> <p>Jonatas</p>	<p>Dear Cristina.</p> <p>Everything is OK! The installments will be lower at the beginning, but and later? Will the companies produce in sufficient quantities to satisfy this increase of demand? What guarantees it? And you Jonatas, what do you think about it?</p>
<p>Hi Jonatas!</p> <p>I agree with you. The teacher said the same thing in Satellite Class.</p> <p>Cristina</p>	<p>Hugs.</p> <p>E-learning Tutor Jacqueline Lameza</p>

Table 5 – Example of Distant Tutor Mediation

Analyzing the example above one perceives that the student Jonatas answered in assertive mode, but lacking depth in his answer. He failed to view a little farther, beyond what was explained in class. By her side the student Cristina, only agreed with Jonatas. The Distant Tutor instead of criticizing them, saying that it is not enough simply to agree or disagree, but it is necessary that a justification occurs with quality and depth, conducting them to reflection, questioning them. She fulfilled her role of orientating, conductor and motivator, conducting Jonatas and Cristina to the collaboration learning construction.

<b>Student</b>	<b>Distant Tutor</b>
Jacqueline, With a low interest rate the persons will buy much and the prices will increase much, which will imply on the return of inflation.  Marcos	Dear Marcos and Maria,  You two point to a price increase. Why should this happen? With a low interest rate there is not a discouragement in investing in papers, or financial investment? The best option, would not be invest on production? What do you think?
Hi Jacqueline! With a lower interest rate the persons will buy more. There will be a lack of goods in the market which will pressure the prices increase.  Hugs, Maria	Hugs.  E-learning Tutor Jacqueline Lameza

Table 6 – Example of Distant Tutor Mediation

In this item, analyzing the Distant Tutor posture one evaluates that the students Marcos and Maria pointed towards a possible consequence, a price increase, which is right; however, some premises needed to be questioned. That is what was done by the Distant Tutor. Every time when we are questioned we area lead to reflect, to think and to search. The students certainly, when returning to the forum will bring more contributions for enriching the discussion and collective knowledge constitution.

<b>Student</b>	<b>Distant Tutor</b>
Tutor Jacqueline, everything OK?  With a fall on the interest rate, part of the investors will sell their fixed income actives for applying on the stock market, and the stock prices will tend to increase  Hugs.  André.	Hi, André.  In order that the stock market is attractive, the companies need to produce more. Right? To apply in stock is the same that applying in production? Oh! Do not forget to mention the source. OK? For those interested, follows the link: <a href="http://www.seuconsultorfinanceiro.com.br/artigos/economia.php?secao=44&amp;parametro=869">http://www.seuconsultorfinanceiro.com.br/artigos/economia.php?secao=44&amp;parametro=869</a> Always share! Hugs,  E-learning Tutor Jacqueline Lameza

Table 7 – Example of Distant Tutor Mediation



In this episode one evaluates that the student Andre made a serious mistake in his posting. He copied from internet and did not mention the source, besides making no comment about the theme. In the forum evaluation criteria, it is already included that this is forbidden. The Distant Tutor did not provoke any constraint to the student but made it clear that all the sources consulted have to be mentioned. And, what is even better, conducted the student to read the article and to interpret it, in the measure that questioned them. She made clear the importance of his research, since it was shared with everybody. In E-learning, sharing is indispensable. So, as affirmed by <sup>[3]</sup>, it is not interesting to submit the students to situations of discomfort due to a more severe criticism, for they may feel rejected and abandon the environment.

We showed only some simulations, but they are very close to situations that the Distant Tutor, faces in the practice. In the demonstrated form of conducting a forum, even though being a simulation one can observe that no student remained without having his/her postings read and considered, the due "critics" were made, but framed in courtesy and affectivity.

## **6. Evaluating the Discussion Forums**

In the moment of evaluation, the Distant Tutor will have the opportunity of evaluating the quantity and quality of the posted content, once during the forum mediation his role was of conductor, mediator. The base will be always the criteria of participation and evaluation listed previously.

Spelling and concordance errors can be mentioned in the feedback, but very carefully, any bad treatment, can push away the student.

The feedback should start with the student's name. An affective language is always indispensable and bondholder. Say farewell to the student with a hug and also sign. It should be made clear to the student that his/her messages were read, and, mainly, because he/she made a mistake or lost a grade. Also he/she cannot receive the maximum grade without merit, much less a single grade for all the students, unless all of them have a plausible justification. For the student that did not participate, the grade 0 (zero) should be attributed, but always followed by a feedback. It is important the student knows that the Distant Tutor regrets his/her absence, how much he/she is important for the group.

## 7. Final Considerations

Far from exhausting the subject about the importance of the Distant Tutor formation with emphasis in the effective evaluation discussion forums mediation, we had in view offer elements necessary for the development of the Distant Tutors continuous capacitation formation, provide conditions for these professionals have a solid formation furnished by the Superior Education institutions in which they act. Such formation compatible with the Distant Tutor great importance in the E-learning scenery in Brazil and the world.

It is considered that the elaboration of complete manuals based on Distant Tutors real necessities, constitute a differential for the solid formation of these professionals. What is evident is that this formation has to have practical character, that's why the emphasis on simulations.

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