The tutor's role in distance education: how educational institutions have conceived it?

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Summary

This article presents the results of a bibliographic research aimed to identify national an international productions that deal with the tutor's role in distance education. Aimed to analyze the amount of research on the topic and if the conceptions adopted were similar to those of the present work, ie the tutor seen as a active actor and fundamental in the student learning process. To this end, we conduced exploratory research and content analyzes about the items identified as tutor's attributes in many studies, in order to identify the most cited, the little remembered and perform some qualitative analyzes on these data.

Keywords: tutor, role, state of the art, distance education

1. Introduction

The tutors are mediators in the students learning processes and are fundamental to create situations that promote the knowledge construction. The good performance of a tutor can be a booster for a unmotivated student and fundamental to all who aim achieve their objectives in the course, but encounter some difficulties. On the other hand, the tutor who doesn't fulfill their role satisfactorily can leave many students without the necessary care and cause a environment of dissatisfaction or abandonment [5].

But for a tutor to exert its function satisfactorily firstly he and the other people involved in this course should know their role well. However, different institutions attribute usually distinct roles to the tutors. Within the same institution, courses can also present this diversity. And even within the same course.

Thus, it was seen as necessary to investigate work done in Brazil and parts of the world concerning the role of the tutor in Distance Education (DE), especially those based on a conception of tutoring similar to those adopted in this article. It was, therefore, a bibliographic research, conducted in 2011, in books and national and international bases, as part of a doctoral project.

The following will be explained the concept of tutoring adopted, the work surveyed and analysis of the tutor's attribute in these works.

2. The role of tutor in DE: adopted conception

In distance education, there is a distinction between teacher and tutor. In particular in the model adopted by the system UAB (Open University of Brazil), and used by several Brazilian institutions, we have: the teacher produces instructional materials and activities of the discipline and manage its execution, and the tutor works directly with students, yet that distance, healing their doubts, evaluating them, trying to identify their difficulties and mediating the learning process. This is the model considered in this work.

Firstly you must consider that in DE there is a physical and temporal distance between students and tutors, and the technology is present as an instrument of mediation. This requires a new posture in both the student and the tutor. Thus, the tutor is seen as a teacher, but with peculiar characteristics to the needs of DE [4].

Give an explanation presentially does not require the same skills to do it through a computer, for example. Here the tutor needs to use many different resources (text, sound, video, forum, chat, video conferencing etc.) To make himself understood. The tutor should even plan and guide discussions between students either in person or virtually [2] [4].

The teacher in the role of tutor is today more a mediator in the learning process. It shall promote the realization of activities and support their resolution, and not just show the correct answer; should offer new sources of information; must understand the subject taught and the organization of content; must guide and support the students [7].

However, as emphasized by Andrade [1], can't be assigned to the tutor the mere role of encouraging. According to the benchmarks of quality of MEC / SEED [3]

> The tutor should be understood as one of the subjects who actively participate in the pedagogical practice. Their activities the distance and / or presentially should contribute to the development of teaching and learning process and to follow up and evaluation of the pedagogic project.

It can be said that the role of the tutor is "[...] more than teach, it is to do learn [...], focusing on the creation, management and regulation of learning situations" [6]. It's act as a mediator, facilitator and motivator in the process of individual and group learning. It is to be active in the process of the student's knowledge construction. As quoted by Vygotsky in relation to teachers, being able to transpose to the tutors:

> That is why in the process of education also up to master an active role: to cut, chop and sculpt the elements of the environment, combine them by more ways for them to perform the task that he, the master, needs. Thus, the educational process has become trilaterally active: is active the student, is active the master, is active the environment created between them [8].

Tutors can also within the same course have different assignments. According to [3], a quality system of tutoring should predict the actions of professionals providing distance tutoring and present tutoring:

The **distance tutoring** acts from the institution mediating the pedagogical process with students geographically distant. Should clarify doubts through technological resources, promote spaces of collective construction of knowledge and participate in the evaluation process.

The **present tutoring** serves students in presential poles. The tutor must know the course project and didactic material in order to assist students in their individual and group activities, fostering research and answering specific questions about the technologies used. Must participate in presential moments, such as assessments and practical classes, and keep in communication with the students and with the course staff.

3. Works involving the tutor's role

Surveys were conducted in books and digital repositories (Table 1) in search of theses, dissertations, and articles related to tutoring, aiming to identify the role of the tutor in them. For this, it was used the search keyword "tutor", because the term is the same in Portuguese, English and Spanish, and is contained in the word "tutoring":

In Brazil	
Domínio público	http://www.dominiopublico.gov.br/pesquisa/PesquisaObraForm.jsp
Google Acadêmico	http://scholar.google.com.br/
MCT	http://bdtd.ibict.br/
USP	http://www.teses.usp.br/
UERJ	http://www.bdtd.uerj.br/
Unicamp	http://libdigi.unicamp.br/
UNB	http://bdtd.bce.unb.br/tedesimplificado/
PUC-RS	http://www3.pucrs.br/portal/page/portal/biblioteca/Capa/BCEPesquisa/BCETesesDiss
UFMG	http://www.bibliotecadigital.ufmg.br/
UFRGS	http://www.lume.ufrgs.br/
UFSC	http://www.ead.ufsc.br/trabalhos/
UNESP	http://www2.fc.unesp.br/BibliotecaVirtual/
UFPR	http://dspace.c3sl.ufpr.br/dspace/
UFC	http://www.teses.ufc.br/
Public Library of Paraná	http://www.bpp.pr.gov.br/
Periodical Educação & Realidade	http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/educacaoerealidade
Informática na educação: teoria & prática	http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/InfEducTeoriaPratica
RENOTE - Revista Novas Tecnol. na Educação	http://seer.ufrgs.br/RENOTE
Scielo	http://www.scielo.org/php/index.php
ANATED - associação nacional dos tutores da educação a distância	http://www.anated.org.br/
Abroad	
Repositório da Universidade do Minho (Portugal)	http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/
Stanford University (EUA)	http://highwire.stanford.edu/
OpenDOAR (The Directory of Open Access Repositories)	http://www.opendoar.org/
RCAAP (Repositório Científico de Acesso Aberto em Portugal)	http://www.rcaap.pt/

ROAR (Registry of Open Access Repositories) - University of Southampton (UK)	http://roar.eprints.org/
DSPACE (Open-source solution for acessing, managing and preserving scholarly works) – Repositório desenvolvido pelo MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)	http://www.dspace.org/
Repository66.org - Mapa de repositórios institucionais de acesso livre, mantido por Stuart Lewis - Aberystwyth University (UK)	http://maps.repository66.org/

Table 1. Research bases.

To organize the materials found was created a spreadsheet with information regarding the subjects discussed. Some materials that do not fit in the context of Distance Education (DE) were discarded, as tutors of students with special needs. Those who seemed in context, but it can't access the files were marked in red. Figure 1 shows a portion of the worksheet created.

Figure 1. Extract of the spreadsheet of the work surveyed about tutoring.

Were selected 139 works. Initially was performed an exploratory reading in each of these materials, especially focusing on his resume, introduction and index. The goal was to fill in the spreadsheet some information considered relevant: job title, authors, type (dissertation, thesis, article, book etc.), Institution, whether it is domestic or not keywords, if the focus is tutoring, if the focus is higher education and the issues discussed (the tutor, mediation etc.). The spreadsheet had summary fields and comments.

After this exploratory analysis, the items that have shown the most significant contributions have been marked in light blue and they appeared to be the largest contribution were marked in dark blue. The others remain blank.

Several aspects were taken into consideration, as the year's work (higher priority to the most recent), if it was attributions of tutors, among others.

Only some papers were read in full. Most were read in the items specifically related to the duties of tutors.

4. Analysis of tutor's role in the works

Of the 139 works, 62 treated in some way, the role and attributions of tutors, however, 38 brought most relevant contributions. In these 38 studies, theoretical references varied, got 64 suggestions of profile, skills or attributions of tutors, and also brought some contributions from other works besides its.

We conducted a content analysis of the 64 suggestions of tutor's attributions, as shown in Table 2. The percentage of each item was calculated taking as universe these 64 suggestions. We chose to keep a large number of subcategories for greater clarity and detail of the attributions. But for better organization, they were categorized as: Knowledge, Attitudes, Orientation, Communication (with students), Teaching Learning, Administrative activities and interaction with staff.

Attributions of Tutor	Qty	%
knowledge		
Dominating and utilizing technologies (such as synchronous and asynchronous tools)	25	39%
Knowing fundamentals and **methodologies of Distance Education** / Dominate pedagogical techniques of **Tutoring**	4	6%
Knowing the course content, the pedagogical project, the schedule, the **disciplines** taught etc.	20	31%
Attitudes		
Being proactive / encourage students to use the channels of interaction for tutoring and ask questions / probing questions	19	30%
Be **flexible**, receptive, taking into account the commitments and problems of students	15	23%
Be **available** / provide hours of assistance the distance (distance tutors) and presentially at the poles (present tutors)	10	16%
Being **punctual** and **frequent** in virtual and presential meetings	10	16%
Being **compromised**, dedicated / have discipline / being motivated in their role and in troubleshooting / build trust	10	16%
Treat students with **respect, empathy** and understanding / being **ethical** / be **humorous** / be **patient** / have good interpersonal relationships / Create **affective** bonds	32	50%
Ensuring the confidentiality of tests and key correction, as well as the results of evaluations	3	5%
Orientation		
Guide students early in the course on **new methods of study** and the **technology** adopted	9	14%
Guide students to know their **rights and responsibilities within the institution and course** / create sense of belonging / explain about the role of tutors / provide **guidelines**	30	47%
Guide students to **develop a study plan** / suggest activities that create systematic **study habits** and contribute to the development of knowledge-learn	13	20%
Encourage collaboration, cooperation and building knowledge together / Create study environments / promote the integration of students / Stimulate the creation of **learning communities** / encourage **student interaction with presential tutors**	31	48%
Motivate (participation, learning, critical reflection) / Encouraging the involvement of students in solving activities, provoke the desire to learn / **calm** students face the difficult moments	39	61%

Encourage self-confidence, innovation, creativity / Contribute to **individual valorization**	8	13%
Encouraging autonomy, independence in decision making, initiative, independent study methodology, and shared group leadership	16	25%
Alert students regarding compliance with the schedule, keeping them aware of the deadlines of the activities.	6	9%
Raise awareness students about the **differences in culture** and experience that may exist between group members	1	2%
Communication		
Keeping in touch frequently with students via email, MSN, forums	21	33%
Contact with students who demonstrate discouragement, little participation / Prevent students leave studies	10	16%
Communicate **clearly, objectively and grammatically correct**	15	23%
Dialogue with students as equals / **in a less hierarchical**	6	9%
Addressing students **with formality**	2	3%
Endeavor to understand the student (writing, speaking)	3	5%
Drive and **mediate discussions**, to stay focused on the course content and to provide greater complexity / be the link between teacher and student / Praise participations	30	47%
Interfere in cases of conflict or disagreement of ideas / Dealing with disruptive students	4	6%
Teaching and learning		
Establish strategies to solve the problems inherent to the activities / **Presenting ideas or ways** to solve an activity / help students solve pedagogical issues that may impede progress in course / Mediating the learning process / **Respect the learning pace** of the student / translate scientific discourse to narrative form, assisting the student in understanding the content	42	66%
Formulate stimulating questions / create problem-solving situations / Questioning the knowledge acquired by the student in an activity in another, testing their reasoning and creativity / proposing motions that favor the advance / to do didactic interventions	14	22%
Using **teaching strategies appropriate to individual differences**, cultural / **Valuing students' experiences** and knowledge acquired in practice	7	11%
Assist students when requested (or in carrying out activities relating to didactic material) / Answer students, **clarify doubts** / provide instructions	33	52%
Help students in **troubleshoot technical** / in technological skills development / in use of technological resources	21	33%
Help students solve **administrative issues**	5	8%
Help students resolve **personal issues** that may impede progress in the course	7	11%
Respond quickly students' questions	14	22%
Give correct answers to questions from students / That completely **respond** to questions	4	6%
Suggest / provide the student with **additional material** to complement content	14	22%
Encourage research and use of library and laboratories	11	17%
Connecting knowledge to professional practice of students / providing practical examples / encourage students to bring real examples for the disciplines	8	13%
Promote the teaching / **Transmit knowledge**	5	8%
Interact with content and didactic material, spreading them and stimulating them	5	8%
Know the students, their sociocultural profile, expectations, needs	10	16%
Accompany students individually / accompany the frequency / manage activities / identified learning difficulties / Valuing individual contributions	31	48%
Give constant feedback on the learning process to the students / Make constructive critiques	26	41%
Evaluate students / Participate in student assessment / provide students with clear criteria for evaluation / be fair in student assessment	26	41%
Administrative activities and interaction with staff		
Forwarding questions and problems of the students those responsible (when it is not the responsibility of the tutor) / intermediate relations of students and other staff members	16	25%
Participate in course activities and disciplines such as meetings, assessments, classes etc.	8	13%
Run the requests of the teacher or coordination, such as sending reports about communication problems etc.	12	19%
Communicate constantly with tutors, teachers, staff etc.	11	17%
Participate in trainings / continuous upgrades	13	20%
Identify flaws in the educational materials, in the activities etc., anticipating students' questions / **Notify the teacher possible needs for adjustments**	5	8%
Perceive the satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the discipline and course	4	6%
Evaluate the course	2	3%
Self assess / investigate and reflect on their own practice	4	6%
Ensure that the course objectives are being met / Ensure that students are achieving the appropriate level	7	11%

Represent students before the administration	1	2%
Maintain the technological and physical resources of the pole **in perfect functioning** for classroom activities, such as assessments, video and web conferencing etc. / Control input and output of didactic material evaluation, correction keys and administrative material	4	6%
Forward to tutor distance specific questions od students	1	2%
Apply the evaluations, with smoothness, caution and vigilance (without creating atmosphere of fear).	7	11%
Register the frequency of students	6	9%
Ignored		
Enroll course participants	2	3%
Have a vocation to teach / have psychological support	1	2%
Move more to the group than to the individual, in order to remedy general doubts	1	2%
Keeping only as an observer, monitoring the student with a minimum of interference	1	2%
Preparing teaching materials and activities / adapt the material to diverse cultures	9	14%
Manage and administer the course	1	2%
Prepare evaluations / adapt the evaluations / Define strategies and evaluation criteria	4	6%

Table 2. Attributions of tutor in several works.

Some items were marked in blue, because they relate exclusively to present tutor. The items in red were marked "ignored" for not being in accordance with the theoretical assumptions of this present work. For example, it is not considered here that the tutor should be aimed more to the group than the individual, nor that one should keep only as an observer, or that the tutor is who prepare the materials and assessments, rather than the teacher.

The percentage helped to see the attributions most frequently cited in the works, as: presenting ways, ideas, strategies to solve problems (66%); motivate students (61%); answer their questions (52%); having ethical attitude, empathy, respect and affection (50%); encourage collaborative and cooperative works (48%); mediate discussions (47%), among others.

If on one hand, the above data show that many institutions remembered important aspects to define the role of their tutors, on the other hand also shows that the other did not have the same concern. That is, while 66% cite the importance of the tutor mediate the learning process of students with directions and suggestions, other 34% do not seem to consider this important aspect. If 52% think that answer questions is an attribution of the tutor, other 48% did not mention this function. Ie, the data show that, at least from the point of view of the role of tutors, many attributions that would be critical to its good performance, were not considered as necessary, which is worrying.

But other data are even more impactful. If we analyze the worksheet in opposite view, ie, looking for items less cited, some points stand out. One that caught our attention was that of 64 contributions, only four (6%) cited the need

for tutors to reflect on their practice or to self-evaluate, which is considered here that should be a role not only of the tutor but of every professional the education area.

Another point that caught our attention was that, also only four (6%) cited the importance of the tutor know the methodology adopted in the DL course. One of the major problems of distance learning is that many teachers and tutors try to reproduce practices of presential education. If know the methods, techniques and tools necessary for distance education is not a priority, hardly tutors reach a level of excellence in their work.

Only five papers (8%) attributed to the tutor's role to interact with the learning materials, spreading them and stimulating them. This may mean that many people, courses or institutions are leaving students in charge of their learning and the tutors are putting themselves in a passive position, only waiting when a student to seek them to answer questions. That is, the tutor is not being active through challenging questions, raising discussions among students etc. He is confusing the autonomy of students with leaves them isolated and without proper support.

5. Conclusions

This paper aims to show the result of a bibliographic research aimed to identify what works in Brazil and parts of the world that deal in some way, the role of tutors in distance education, especially within the concept of tutoring adopted here.

From 139 articles found, we obtained 64 suggestions profile (in 38 works). The attributions arising from them show that way of conceiving tutoring is varied and a brief analysis indicates that many essential aspects for a good performance of tutors are neglected.

What may be occurring due to unawareness of the effective role of the tutor, for lack of definition of an appropriate methodology for distance learning or even of these aspects are not aligned in the courses. This can lead to tutors to act behind the needs of the students, which tends to generate a lot of inconvenience, especially relating to the process of teaching and learning.

Thus, it is seen the need for the role of tutors is better worked in institutions, enabling the maturation of both the definition of its attributions, as

their own concept of education adopted. This requires a research and performing experiments.

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