THE TEACHER TUTOR IN A DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE: EVALUATION, PROBLEMS AND SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The discussion about the best ways to approach education permates distance learning, especially when new technologies and new roles, such as the tutor's, enter the process. This article aims to discuss results of an exploratory study on the role of the teacher/tutor in a distance learning undergraduate course, its impact on the students, problems detected during its evaluation, reasons that caused them and possible solutions.

Keywords: tutor, role, evaluation, problems

1. Introduction

Discussions on education and the mechanisms adopted in it were already a source of concern for greek philosophers more than 2000 years ago and it still holds the attention of educators, researchers and managers. How to counterbalance the various elements in the teaching-learning process? Which methodology and resources to use in the different school subjects? In order to answer these and other questions, didactic proposals centered on the effective participation of students have gained ground.

And this discussion permeates distance learning under new forms, among other reasons, because new roles come up, such as that of the tutor. The idea of tutoring seems loaded with misunderstandings and new problems that may affect the student directly, demotivating or leading to dropouts.

In this article we will highlight, starting from a reflection on the role of the teacher/tutor in the teaching-learning process, some problems concerning tutoring and factors that cause them, focusing the analysis on the evaluation of a group of tutors from an undergraduate course made by the "managing teacher" and in their self-evaluation.

2. The teacher's/tutor's role in Distance Learning

Commonly, in DL there is a distinction between teacher and tutor. Especially in the model adopted by the UAB (Universidade Aberta do Brasil) system we see that: the teacher produces the instructional material, the activities in the discipline and manages its execution; the tutor works directly with the students, despite the distance, answering their questions, assessing them, trying to identify their difficulties and mediating the learning process.

Let us analyze some aspects of the role of the tutor. The first one is that tutors and students are, in general, in different places, which makes the teaching-learning process more difficult. A second aspect derives from the use of technology as a mediating tool and the difficulties inherent to its use. Giving an explanation in person, speaking, writing on the board and looking in the eyes does not require the same abilities when doing it in a computer. There the tutor needs to use the most different resources to make him/herself understood and the students also needs to know how to manipulate the computational

instrument. As mentioned in INED [2], the tutor must also guide debates among students, on-campus or using technologies.

There are, as well, the affective and emotional aspects. The tutor must be capable of identifying and dealing with emotions, trying to provide motivational support to the students who need it, being constantly in touch with them [3].

However, it is up to the managing teacher to create an environment in which students get involved with the materials, relating them to their lives, turning them into personal knowledge. The teacher must also create group activities that motivate socialization, collaboration and cooperation [3]. The tutor would work as an stimulator of this socialization, even if separated from students in space or time, allowing the creation of learning communities.

It is necessary to create a bond between student, tutor and institutions and a sense of belonging. A bond that should be highlighted is that between tutor and managing teacher responsible for the subject, since the tutor must inform the teacher about the problems and necessary improvements.

Briefly, it can be said that the tutor function consists of: helping students understand the content and how it is related to the learning objectives [2]; identifying how they are reacting to instructional materials, to the activities suggested and to learning; being aware of the students difficulties, answering their questions and establishing mechanisms for mediation and remedial work; providing support materials and constant feedback, important for the construction of knowledge; acting as a mediator, facilitator and motivator in the individual or group learning process.

3. Tutor Evaluation: Criteria and Answers

The current case study is exploratory and relied on a list of competences for tutors (Table 1) based on quality benchmarks, official documents, theoretical studies and surveys among DL professionals

ACADEMIC SUPPORT
1. Masters the content of the discipline
2. Knows the objectives, the teaching methodology and others aspects related to the discipline and the course.
3. Provides information about additional resources.
4. Motivates students pleasantly, by making thorough and constructive comments.
5. Is willing to help and even encourage a student in difficulty.
6. Clarifies points that either were not fully understood or properly learned previously.
7. Encourages students to ask questions.

8. Helps students deal with issues that are not related to the content, but that may affect their learning.
9. Helps students providing clues as to how to organize their ideas, suggesting additional materials and different ways to analyze questions.
10. Helps students establish a connection between content and its goals, and to understand the the potential applications of the content in their areas of interest.
ASSESSMENT
11. Assesses, classifies and gives feedback to students about the activities.
12. Provides fair, on time and useful feedback to the students, about the activities.
13. Informs students of their strong and weak point and makes the necessary referrals.
14. Knows the assessment criteria for each of the activities and how to calculate the final average.
15. Corrects all on-campus and virtual activities within the deadline.
COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION
16. In the beginning of the course, appropriately establishes contact with the students.
17. Keeps regular contact with students throughout the course.
18. Communicates with students in a clear, helpful and grammatically correct manner.
19. Communicates with students in a friendly and respectful manner.
20. Promptly clarifies doubts, in no more than 24h, except for Saturdays after 1 p.m., Sundays and holidays specified in the academic calendar.
21. Provides and meets online service hours (MSN, SKYPE etc.).
ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS
22. Analyses student profiles in the beginning of the course.
23. Keeps records of student activities (papers, tests, progress and/or regress)
24. Helps during ongoing revision in the discipline virtual classroom.
25. Attends previously arranged meetings.
26. Frequently interacts with the teacher about the students performance in the discipline.
27. Refers to the teacher when having difficulty to address questions submitted by the students.
28. Registers student grades within the deadlines, assisting in the closing of the diaries.
29. Provides fast and consistent feedback to the specialist teacher about his/her requests.
30. Guides students on issues related to the academic administration of the course.

Table 1. List of tutor competences

In a preliminary study, an evaluation of Logics and Discrete Mathematics (LDM) tutors from an undergraduate technological course was made by the discipline teacher. For such, a competence management software was used, in which the teacher first registered the competences mentioned and established the expected performance levels. Then, evaluated the performance of each of her tutors, grading them from 1 to 5 in each of the items. The average of the grades produced a final result for each tutor, in which from 15, four were considered excellent (average close to 5), two had a good result (close to 4), five performed from regular to low (close to 3) and four were in considerable need of improvement (around 1 or 2).

At last, a comparison was made between the results obtained and the performance of the students attended by these tutors. The performance of the students, in relation to grades and approval rate, was closely related to the performance of the tutors, although other factors also influence, such as the campuses, age, former student education, etc. This way, the model started to

stimulate the perfection of the evaluation process, improve the notion the team has of the course and of the tutor about his own performance.

As Moran [4] observes,

> Many students find it difficult to work on their own with the computer, without interaction. [...] they are extremely dependent, need constant monitoring, feeling there is an advisor around. Others learn better together, physically and virtually.

We agree with his saying that the constant presence of the tutor may make a huge difference in the case of more co-dependent students. However, we also understand that even for the most independent ones that presence is important, since on long term courses we may find personal problems, learning difficulties, fear, loneliness, in short, a series of situations that hinder the development of the student. Therefore, the tutor may be fundamental in helping the student overcome them.

These reflections took us to the need of having a deeper understanding of the issues involved in the tutor x student relationship. New analysis, now qualitative, were made with the evaluation instruments and by means of classroom observation in the learning environment and during on-campus meetings. This way, we verified that the items in which most tutors had major deficiencies were exactly the ones that most affected students performance, the ones related to academic support.

Many tutors did not provide additional information to the students, were not available to help those who had most difficulties and did not provide constructive comments that would effectively support the construction of knowledge. Mostly, they limited themselves to answering the students questions in a very simplistic manner, or giving direct answers, instead of instigating and proposing problems that would make them think and get to the intended solution. Few tutors stimulated their students to be critical in relation to the content being studied, or tried to help them relate the discipline to their lives and areas of interest.

These analysis allowed us to notice, as well, that students who had personal problems, problems managing time among others, may not have had full support of their tutors.

Regarding learning assessment, tutors corrected on-campus and distance activities properly. However, many did not provide adequate feedback

or delayed their corrections, to the point of having their students overcome their difficulties on their own, or feeling harmed in relation to contents that had not been assimilated yet, which demotivated them.

Regarding communication, most tried to establish a bond in the beginning of the discipline but that did not continue. Messages sent were not individualized. The delay when answering questions caused accumulation of doubts and even disbelief in the course and/or modality. Besides, many did not provide enough time to help in a synchronous way. Some, however, did create strong bonds, difficult to be found even in on-campus education. Their students were exactly the ones who performed better.

At last, regarding administrative activities, many did not perform a diagnostic evaluation of the student profiles in order to provide more individualized attention. The follow-up was basically by means of grading the activities, without records of their advances and/or regressions. Most would attend the meetings arranged by the managing teacher, but did not help him think about the virtual classroom and the instructional materials and did not provide feedback on the difficulties submitted by the students.

But why many tutors did not perform within expected? Was it lack of commitment? Ignorance about DL and its function? Lack of time to dedicate? These and other concerns motivated us to continue the analysis of the performance of tutors, trying to think about which factors may affect their performance and have an impact on learning.

4. Tutoring Difficulties

In order to answer some of these questions a questionnaire was created through a website, and sent to all fifteen discipline tutors, eleven of which answered.

The first four questions aimed at identifying the formation, experience of the tutor and his/her relationship with the institution that offered the course:

1) *"Which was your highest degree at the time of the LDM discipline?"* Most (six) had only an undergraduate degree, three had a masters degree and two an specialization course.

2) *"What was your experience with DL at the time of the LDM discipline?".* All answered "less than six months", which shows inexperience in the area.

3) *"What was your teaching experience a at the time of the LDM discipline?"* All reported to have some experience (on-campus or distance), most of which (six) had between one and three years of experience, three had between three and five years and two had more than two years.

4) *"What was your relationship with the institution at the time of the LDM discipline?"* Most (nine out of eleven) were not teachers in the institution, seven of which had other jobs, besides tutoring. Two were temporary teachers in the institution (on-campus). Only two were full time tutors.

The fifth question addressed one of the major points of interest for the research, allowing multiple answers: *"Which were the main factors that may have hindered your performance as a tutor in the LDM discipline?".* The most mentioned (six out of eleven answers) was the low income in the tutoring scholarship. The second was lack of time to dedicate to tutoring (three answers). Those who chose "others" were able to describe other problems, such as difficulties with the instructional material, extensive content and low level of previous knowledge of the students.

The sixth question aimed at a tutor self-evaluation: *"How do assess your commitment to tutoring the LDM discipline?"* Out of eleven tutors, eight considered themselves good and three excellent. In a study by Pasta and Cruz [5], trying to identify how tutors in their course were performing, a self-evaluation was applied in which, in general, tutors also thought that they performed according to expectations.

Finally, the last question was: *"Add here what you believe is in need of change in order to improve tutoring in long distance courses".* Table 2 shows the items mentioned, after having been grouped by content analysis. More items related to improving payment and the need for a more adequate form of employment/hiring.

Items mentioned	Qty
Better payment	5
More adequate form of employment/hiring	3
Reduce the amount of students per tutor	1
Reduce the amount of activities in the environment	1
Improve the instructional material	1
Use more resources such as video, web conferencing, etc.	1
Train students to use computers before starting the discipline.	1
Better preparation of the tutors for the discipline.	1
Need for better performance of the on-campus tutor	1

Table 2. Improvement needs in tutoring

5. Analysis of the difficulties in tutoring

As time went by, education was no longer so centered on the teacher and became more centered on the student. The teacher would provide means for the student to become more active and capable of building his own knowledge. This way of looking at the teacher's and student's role gained ground in distance education, which demands more autonomy in the students.

However, the assessment analysis pointed out problems related to the lack of understanding of the tutor's role. On the other hand, other factors, both internal and external to the institution, affect their performance.

Internal factors

One of the major problems detected concerns the lack of effective student support. But is this not the main function of a tutor? It seems that many are falling in the false dilemma analyzed by Duckworth [6], which is related to applying Piaget to the classroom: "we either teach too soon, and they cannot learn, or we teach too late, and they already know". In other words, they are leaving for the student all the responsibility for his/her learning. What about mediation? For Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development is the distance between the real level of development - independent solution of problems, and the level of potential development - solution of problems under the monitoring of an adult or cooperating with their peers [1]. It is in this zone that the tutor must work. But s/he understands that s/he should only answer student questions, evaluate them and fulfill all administrative duties. They do not seem to know the students well, do not offer clues that lead to thinking, nor adequate feedback, and do not stimulate group activities.

What we see is an inversion of roles. If, before, education was focused on the teacher, now it is so on the students. However, what we see is a student alone, without support. If there is no satisfactory mediation, the student accesses content and activities, but lacks the adequate support for building knowledge. The teacher, in turn, does not know whether what was prepared was adequate because of lack of feedback from tutors that, on the other hand, believe that are doing their jobs well, according to the self-evaluation.

But what contributes to this way of looking at things? We saw that many tutors did not have previous experience in DL, therefore tending to reproduce

on-campus education. These are, however, different ways of working since they involve technologies and physical and temporal distance. Also, the student profile is different [3].

Other issues that were not tackled in this study also need to be thought about, such as the lack of DL support within the institutions. In Brazil, in many of them, there are isolated groups of people or centers that "run" DL projects, without institutionalization or serious commitment from the managers.

External Factors

Even if the institution believes in DL, many times it is limited to government support, as is the case of public institutions. One point to highlight is tutor payment, the one which was most negatively mentioned by them. Most courses in this situation distinguish teachers and tutors, which must exist because they are different roles, but not in terms of appreciation. For example, at UAB, the scholarship for teachers is R$ 1300.00 and for tutors is R$ 765.00, for 20h per week.

Despite the difference of function between teachers and tutors, they are all teachers. If we make a comparison with on-campus education, can we say that the teacher who writes a textbook is more important in the educational process than the one who is in the classroom with the students or otherwise? Both are teachers and, each with their duties, are of fundamental importance for the success of education.

But the issue of scholarship brings yet other consequences. Out of eleven tutors, only two were full time tutors, and this was the second most negative point mentioned: little time to dedicate to the job due to other activities.

Another issue is employment relationship. In general, tutors do not have a stable employment relationship with the institution. Besides that, in the end of 2011, the government started to limit tutoring to civil servants or graduate students. So, tutors do not know their value well, their goals and cannot dedicate with the same intensity of those who feel they are part of it. This reflects on the students, physically connected to a campus, creating a feeling of not belonging to the collectivity. Since the contracts are temporary, tutors take on other activities, which hinders their performance. Besides, acquired experiences are lost, because many stop tutoring after a while.

6. Final remarks

Many studies have shown that there have been changes in the way we conceive the relationship between teacher, student and the acquisition of knowledge, and distance learning sometimes seems to distance itself from current proposals, placing on the students excessive responsibility for his/her own formation. More than just a discrepancy of epistemological nature, this study shows that many factors contribute to the problems highlighted.

The understanding of the tutor's role needs to improve and the institution must invest in their formation. The teachers must follow them and help them closely. There needs to be a continuous tutor assessment, from many perspectives (the student's, teacher's, other tutors', etc.), what has been worked. In sum, the institution needs to be committed to quality in distance education, institutionalizing it.

Regarding external aspects, the government needs to implement measures to raise the value of teachers and tutors, treating them as equally important subjects. In the courses of continuous offer, it is necessary to implement employment relationship and salary values that make the tutor more committed to the tasks, so that they no longer need other sources of income and can, therefore, improve their dedication and quality in their work.

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