Article

The view from tutors on the use of forums in distance courses

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ABSTRACT

Forum utilization in virtual learning environments was discussed due to its importance in allowing communication during teaching-learning process. Nine instructors of a private university in São Paulo were interviewed. Instructors commonly play an important role assisting students through forums. Seven of them have been using forums in their activities frequently. Student's participation was optional, but six of the instructors prefered to monitor it. Only four attributed grades to participation. These assessment criteria were discussed. Five instructors pointed out that not all students partook regularly in forums. Yet, four suggested that encouraging interaction between participants should be a staple form of mediation. **Forum contributions to virtual teaching**, as well as opening, development and closure stages, were discussed.

Keywords: E-learning. Virtual teaching. Forum. Interaction. Mediation.

importancia para facilitar la comunicación en todo el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Se entrevistó a nueve profesores de una institución privada de educación superior, en São Paulo. Los tutores normalmente desempeñan un papel muy importante en la supervisión de los estudiantes a través del foro. Siete utilizan el foro a menudo en sus actividades. Seis supervisionavan la participación de los estudiantes, aunque era opcional. Sólo cuatro asignarón nota a la participación. Se discuten estos puntos finales. Para cinco tutores, no son todos los estudiantes que asisten constantemente foros. Sin embargo, cuatro tutores sugirieron estimular la interacción entre los participantes del curso como una de las principales formas de mediar el aprendizaje. Se discute la contribución del **foro en el desempeño tutorial**, así como los momentos de apertura, desarrollo y cierre.

Palabras clave: Educación a distancia. Tutoría. Foro. Mediación.

RESUMÉN

El empleo del foro en los ambientes virtuales de aprendizaje para los cursos a distancia se discutió sobre la base de su

RESUMO

O emprego do fórum em ambientes virtuais de aprendizagem de cursos a distância

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foi discutido com base em sua importância para viabilizar a comunicação ao longo do processo de ensino-aprendizagem. Nove tutores de uma instituição particular de ensino superior de São Paulo foram entrevistados. Tutores, geralmente, desempenham papel de grande relevância no acompanhamento de alunos por meio do fórum. Sete utilizavam o fórum frequentemente em suas atividades. Seis monitoravam a participação dos alunos, embora ela fosse facultativa. Apenas quatro atribuíam notas à participação. Esses parâmetros de avaliação foram discutidos. Para cinco tutores, nem todos os alunos participavam constantemente dos fóruns. Contudo, quatro sugeriram o estímulo à interação entre cursistas como uma das principais formas de mediar a aprendizagem. A contribuição do **fórum na atuação tutorial,** bem como os momentos de abertura, desenvolvimento e fechamento, foram debatidos.

Palavras-chave: Educação a distância. Tutoria. Fórum. Mediação. Interação.

INTRODUCTION

The Institutional beginning of distance education (DE) occurred in 1728 for a course offered by the Boston Gazette (Litto and ANT, 2009). However, of the twenty-first century XVIII, the development of new media such as radio, telephone, television and Internet has enabled the rapid advancement of distance education (CAMPOS, COSTA e SANTOS, 2007; MOORE e KEARSLEY, 2007).

In particular, information and communication technologies (ICTs) made possible by the Internet have led several changes (MAIA, 2003; Corrêa, 2005; POZO, 2008; Farias, 2013; Mendonça, 2013). For Campos, Santos and Costa (2007), ICTs are key to virtual communication and allow individuals to have at your fingertips lot of information. Every day, the number of internet ICT users increase.

According to this trend, the changes and benefits provided to the distance learning are enormous: Local flexibility and study schedule, constant updating of information, discussions in different locations in real time or not, and aid in the development of technical and behavioral skills of the student (BELLONI, 2002; Soek and HARACEMIV, 2008).

Consequently, the distance education offers access to training mediated technologies to replace traditional learning resources (CAMPOS, COSTA and SANTOS, 2007). Thus, distance learning courses allow you to meet the need of people seeking training and help in continuing studies, which democratizes access to educational institutions (MAIA, 2002; TENÓRIO et al., 2014).

The contemporary distance education based on web mentoring model, commonly has an essential interface: the virtual learning environment (VLE) (MAIA, 2002; Benetti et al, 2008; Nardocci and CAMPOS, 2011; Comparin, 2013.). The VLE allows the construction of a collaborative network of users in pursuit of learning, integrating managers, teachers and students - subjects involved in the teaching-learning process the distance (Souza et al., 2004). That specific channel of communication and cooperation to a certain course component provides access to private and common areas, according to the user profile. This dynamic interface features synchronous tools (allow real-time communication) and asynchronous (promote communication at different times) in order to meet different needs (CAMPOS, COSTA e SANTOS, 2007).

One of the main tools of VLEs which provide the construction of knowledge through virtual dialogue is the forum (Nardocci and CAMPOS, 2011). Over it, the tutor has the actions of mediation and interaction.

The tutor is an educator who commonly assume the role of teacher at a distance and

need to develop specific skills for his performance in several dimensions, such as educational, technical, managerial, technological and socio-affective (BERNARDINO, 2011; TENÓRIO, SOUTO and TENÓRIO, 2014; TEIXEIRA et al., 2015). In distance education, it acts as student learning mediator and should promote interaction.

Mediation would be the "intervention process of an intermediate element in a relationship; the relationship ceases then to be direct and happens to be mediated by this element "(OLIVEIRA, 2007, p. 26). Since the interaction correspond to the match and interdependent action of two or more individuals, which leads to changes in them (Gervai, 2007; Moran, MASETTO and BEHRENS, 2010).

In the process of teaching and learning at a distance, the forums promote collaborative construction of knowledge, possible through dialogue, exchange of ideas, doubts and questions (Moore and KEARSLEY, 2007; Moran, MASETTO and BEHRENS, 2010; Nardocci and CAMPOS , 2011).

The forum can be defined as an ICT dedicated to the exchange and discussion of information by publishing messages related to a particular topic. Bruno and Hessel (2007), the forum is often used in modern distance education to be asynchronous, so that users do not need to be connected at the same time for communication to happen. Contributions can be made at different times and participation is recorded (Barros and SOUZA, 2009).

It can be configured in several ways according to the construction of the VLE system. Different settings offer different user profile depending on features (Nardocci and CAMPOS, 2011; MOODLE, 2014).

• Teacher, administrator and course creator have access to settings such as:

• Variability in the forum design formatting

(default forum of questions and answers, similar to blog, etc.);

• Organization of forums by topics and classes;

• Separation of forums by groups within the same class;

• Moving a topic in a forum to another;

• Programming opening and closing dates of the forums;

• Block new posts in a forum;

• Acceptance or rejection messages to insert on the forum based on their content so that the publication occurs only upon consent of the mediator. Commonly known as pre-moderated forum;

• Word Substitution (setting to change certain words of a message by symbols or words);

• Establish scales to score score of participation of students in the forum.

Once the forum has created, some features are available to tutor are:

• Transfer the post in a forum to another;

• Edit or delete message from any user;

• Reply to the message of a forum by e-mail;

• Show the participation of students according to established criteria.

Some features available for tutors and students are:

• Different preview modes of forum posts: list answers, showing them from the oldest or the most recent;

- Messages can use all formatting features of HTML language;

- Attach files to messages, with limitation of maximum configurable size;

- Insert multimedia resources in the messages (picture, sound, video, etc.);

- Rich formatting messages with variety of fonts, sizes and colors;

- Possibility of including e-emoticons;

- Search for messages by topic, date and author;

- Configure incoming e-mail when the forum is updated.

Within a course, a forum may meet different objectives. Being for the presentation of the course participants, to questions or the discussion of the contents. Through its scope, the tutor provides recommendations for participants to write their messages and sets the obligation or not participation. In thematic forums for the discussion of the contents, commonly student participation is evaluated.

In this research, the prospects for tutors of a São Paulo institution of higher education on the usage of forum were analyzed. The contribution of this ICT for tutorial mediation and distance interaction were investigated, in order to understand how the forum helps in the teaching-learning process. The article sought to answer three central questions within the surveyed sample:

- The interaction was valued at the opening and closing of the forums?

- What mediation strategies were used?

- What is the Forum's contribution to the tutorial acting?

1. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the prospects for authors on the importance of the forum in distance learning courses were inquired.

1.1. Survey Context

Active tutors in various disciplines of nineteen different courses undergraduate and postgraduate in distance of the same university participated. The courses were in areas such as Social Services, Education, History, Marketing, Systems Analysis and Development, Aesthetics and Personal Image, among others. The institution had ten tutors.

The university was private and located in municipality of Votorantim, in São Paulo. In the courses, the tutor was present on the pole to an in-person meeting in the computer lab weekly.

VLEs the courses were based on the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle), one AVAs free management web platform and widely used around the world. Its first version, developed by Martin Dougiamas, was launched in 2002.

In the courses, the most communities had educational ends, but could still serve as a tutoring room. In them, the teacher or tutor and the students were the participants. Each forum was a topic of discussion on the subject taught and was intended to promote discussion among participants. The participation was optional, but some were worth extra points.

1.2. Profile of participants

The study subjects were nine tutors, seven women and two men; then the sample amounted to 90% of the population of tutors of the institution. One did not participate, due a medical leave. Most tutors had more than 40 years (five), two had 30-40 years and two 20-29 years old.

All have college degrees - two in Education, one in Technology and Legal Fundamentals, one in marketing, one in physiotherapy, one in Social Work and Foreign Trade. Two preferred not to inform.

Six were experts in Physiotherapy, New Technologies, Business Management, Public Policy, Marketing and Methodology for Distance Learning. One was a master in social sciences. Two did not have any graduate.

The formation of a tutor is important for the overall development of the student in a distance learning course. Ideally, their training must be compatible with the area of operation, as occurred in the investigated institution.

Courses that help improve skills and abilities related to distance education may also allow a better tutorial practice in pedagogical dimensions, didactic and technology (BELLONI, 2009). Nevertheless, only three had training or specific training to act as tutor at a distance; the two held in the institution which acted professionally.

Another relevant factor is the work experience. All had one to five years experience as a tutor.

1.3. Data collection instruments

The survey was the case study type (GIL, 2002). Tutors participated in a semi-structured interview (GIL, 2002) personally held in place of the institution in August 2013. It followed a flexible script (Appendix 1) developed by the authors about the forum use, its parameters of evaluation, its relevance to the tutorial role and contribution in the mediation and interaction at a distance.

1.4. Data analysis

The descriptive study used a qualitative approach (GIL, 2002) aimed at deepening the knowledge of the forum use in the tutorial action.

The responses were analyzed according to each topic of the interview (Appendix 1) and grouped according to similarity. It was used, when necessary, analysis of the contents, ie, responses were analyzed and categorized systematic data groups (BARDIN, 1998; GIL, 2002).

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the institution, there were several features (eg forums, video conferencing, virtual chat and phone) that tutors could take advantage of. Seven used the forum to perform their activities and highlighted as a powerful ICT, able to promote interaction between members of a virtual community, social group that establishes debates long enough to point to establish personal relationships in cyberspace (SILVIO, 1999).

Five used it weekly (access with a break greater than two days), and two daily. To one of two tutors who did not use the forum that ICT could assist in teaching practice.

The academic tutor and additional training related to the development of core competencies to the work at a distance (BERNARDINO, 2011), it is important to build the virtual dialogue with the student forums. Including, according to Barbosa (2012), specific training to tutor develops skills to promote interaction between students and motivate and encourage active and independent learning. The fact that six tutors do not have course or training to act in this role could complicate the construction the messages to the forums or to inhibit its use.

Among the seven Forum members interviewed, six controlled the number of participations of students (Figure 1). Although quantity does not amount to the quality, the student who seeks to interact with other course participants and the tutor is more likely to develop than that without effective participation in collaborative learning. Thus, this

virtual space should have a welcoming atmosphere and promote participation, debate and interaction among participants of a course (NARDOCCI e CAMPOS, 2011).

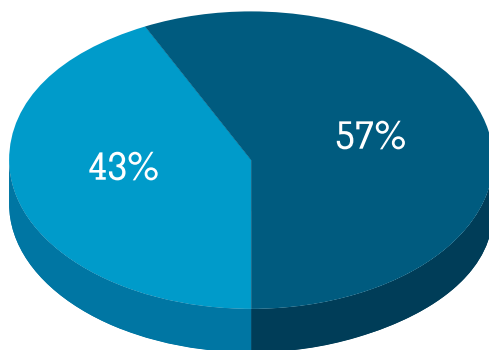process and can be designed to carry out a formative evaluation.
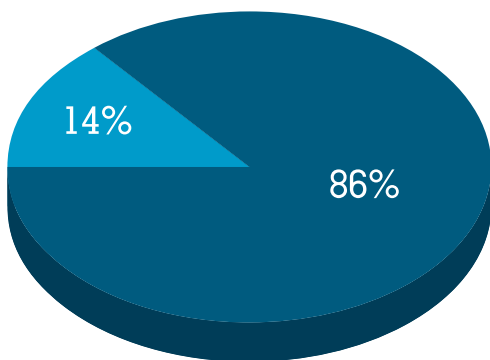
Image 1: Percentage of tutors who control the number of participation of students in the forums.

Source: data from the interview

Image 2: Percentage of tutors who score student participation in the forums.

Source: data from the interview

Regarding the evaluation of student participation in the forum (Image 2), only four punctuated. A low number, because these investments are essential for building knowledge based on a distance courses based on the interaction. The forum allows evaluating the student throughout the teaching-learning

More than half of the tutors indicated that not all students had a constant participation in the forums; In addition, that few showed genuine interest in participating (Table 1). But only one has indicated there are students interested in further discussions through the forum, such portion shall be considered and valued by the tutor in order to encourage other students to take an interest.

Table 1: Involvement of students to use the forum

Involvement of students to use the forum	Number of tutors
Most have active participation	0
Not all participate constantly	5
Show interest in further discussions	1
Few show real interest in participating	2
Rarely participate on the forum	1
Just use the forum to ask questions about the activities	2

Source: data from the interview.

The forum should be used in the best possible way. One suggestion is to prepare a suitable opening message to all (Figure 3). Students must be well informed about the topic of discussion and your goals at the beginning of each topic. For satisfactory mediation, there must be conscious of the fact the forum is an asynchronous tool, so the participant to access it, needs to be guided and encouraged to interact with the other participants by ICT. Therefore, an opening message needs to contextualize and motivate.
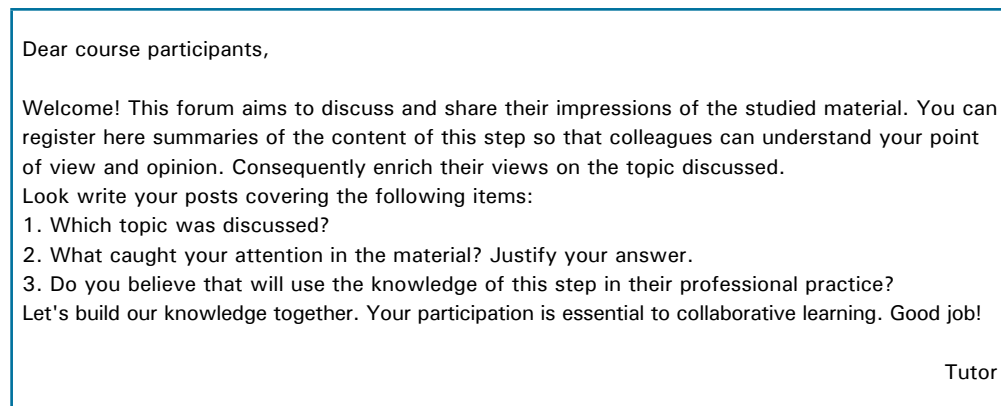
> Dear course participants,
>
> Welcome! This forum aims to discuss and share their impressions of the studied material. You can register here summaries of the content of this step so that colleagues can understand your point of view and opinion. Consequently enrich their views on the topic discussed.
> Look write your posts covering the following items:
> 1. Which topic was discussed?
> 2. What caught your attention in the material? Justify your answer.
> 3. Do you believe that will use the knowledge of this step in their professional practice?
> Let's build our knowledge together. Your participation is essential to collaborative learning. Good job!
>
> Tutor

Image 3: Openingforum suggestion.

The opening message of a forum was considered by all of great value to the beginning of the discussions. The tutor topic in a forum should help the student overcome obstacles such as feelings of anxiety and distress, shyness, scattering ideas, formality in communication and difficulty with language in online environments (and SOUZA SILVA, 2007).

After the opening of the forum, another tutor mediation attitude related to the use of ICT is the need to send to more relapses students an inviting individual message to encourage everyone to interact and participate in discussions. This type of message has the distinction of hosting the tutor to be directed to a specific student, identified by name, which brings greater proximity between the student and the course.

With regard to the strategies used by tutors to open up forums (Table 2), the tutor posted II videos and interviews as a method to sensitize the student. Such a device is important for boosting the way to start the discussion.

But, interview, image, video or any other multimedia feature needs to be consistent with the theme proposed in module or course in the program, as indicated by the tutor VIII. He, although not specifically mentioned have taken advantage of the feature, made it clear discuss issues relevant to the course.

Table 2: Strategies used by tutors to the opening of a forum.

Tutor	Transcript of responses on strategies for open forums
I	Who coordinates the forum is the subject teacher.
II	Insert videos, interviews.
III	Always place a message regarding the subject that students are more interested in discussing.
IV	Did not answer.
V	Did not answer.
VI	Doubts.
VII	I suggest current and everyday matters.
VIII	Related to the current issues.
IX	It is the subject teacher who coordinates the forums..

Source: data from the interview.

Another possibility is the author launch a curious questioning or allude to a disturbing situation for students in order to direct them to initiate the activity. Tutors III and VII showed interest in using awareness to start the discussion on a forum, but it was unclear how. In a way, it seemed that most of the forums was used freely by the tutor, who directed according to their interest and / or students.

Though with a simplistic answer, the author VIII reported concern in open forums to get content questions. This would act as a support resource for the student share difficulties with colleagues.

The participation of the tutor in the early days of the forum is fundamental; after all, it is responsible for encouraging participation and interaction. Usually, at the beginning, students send protocol messages and only respond to the board of inquiry; at best, only interact with the tutor. At that time, the need arises to make connections between ideas launched by students, also supported by new questions related to the content discussed, to stimulate and motivate further each participant through frequent interaction (Table 3).

Table 3: Strategies used in forums moderation.

Strategies used in forums moderation.	Number of tutors
Often interacts with students	2
Individually urges each student to participate shortly after opening	0
Makes connections with the ideas launched by students	2
Encourages interaction among participants	4
Formulates interesting new questions for discussion	1
Tries to motivate those who have not yet participated to discuss the matter	2

Source: data from the interview.

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It is also the mediator use directed and motivating phrases such as, "I count on your participation" or "You have much to contribute to our discussion." This strategy of encouraging the participant be motivated to "go back" to the forum and contribute posts from colleagues, and effectively share the discussion.

The participation of the tutor as a mediator forum, commenting and contributing to the debate, it is vital for the proper use of ICT and its objectives set out initially be achieved. However, the main strategy pointed out by tutors in mediating a forum was to encourage interaction among course participants (Table 3).

To value the interactions, the forum should be closed by a message to convey an overview of the participation of students, and highlight key points and consider whether the discussion reached the forum's objectives. For tutors, the summary of ideas in order to value the participation of each of the students was important (Table 4).

Table 4: Strategies used in closing a forum

How tutors do with the closing forums	Number of tutors
Take advantage of the messages posted by students	0
Seek to supplement the comments already made	1
They value the ideas and contents addressed in discussions	2
Make a summary of the most important ideas mentioned by students	3
Appreciate the participation of students	2
Highlight what will be the next stage of discussions (if applicable)	1

Source: data from the interview.

In general, all tutors demonstrated attention in finalizing a forum. As reported by some, the thanks and the highlight of what will be discussed later refer to the importance of creating a bond between tutor and student, excelling in continuous development of the latter.

According to Almeida (2003), the forum consists of opening, conduct and Conclusion. However, non-compliance or inadequate compliance with any of these steps can derail the collective construction of knowledge by the virtual community, and wasting the potential of ICT.

From the Forum closing, it is possible to assess the student, however, is a prerequisite to establish the parameters for well performing this action. Tutors showed consistent parameters to carry out assessment of their students (Table 5).

Table 5: Evaluation parameters of participation in the forum highlighted by the nine tutors

Evaluation parameters of student participation in forums	Number of tutors
Participated with a meaningful message	6
Participated over a meaningful message	3
Commented the message from a colleague	5
Commented the tutor message	4
Responded to inquiries by the opening message	5

Source: data from the interview.

Undoubtedly, contributions with meaningful messages are of great value to enrich the discussions among the participants, since this democratic space, you can create a knowledge building collaborative environment. Such contributions must be related to the forum's opening message for so the student achieve the proposed objectives in the discussion.

Most tutors also pointed out that his students commented colleagues messages. This initiative should be encouraged for the virtual dialogue be comprehensive and not be limited to the exchange of messages between tutor and student, but include student-student, which is essential for proper use of the tool.

Table 6: Suggested parameters for the assessment of students on a forum

Student / Participação no fórum	Disciplina/ Pontos
Participated with a meaningful message	1
Participated over a meaningful message	2
Responded to questions posed by tutor	2
Commented the message from a colleague	1
Commented the message from a colleague or more	2
Observed the current rules of spelling when performing interactions	2
Total	**10**

One suggestion from the authors to well perform the evaluation stage of student participation in the forums is to establish evaluation parameters by the institution or the coordination of tutors. The importance of holding such a procedure is necessary to be a uniformity in the assessment of students by tutors. In Table 6, we propose evaluation parameters scored for student participation on a forum.

Table 7 brings answers on how the forum can help tutorial performance. The tutor III highlighted one of the true aspects of the forum, the interaction between the people involved in the context of the course.

Tutors IV, V and VIII scored the forum use for students' doubts. As mentioned earlier, this is possible, however, the most appropriate

is to have a thematic forum and the other as a support tool to deal with the questions of the students. The forum offers a range of possibilities of use in a distance learning course and it

is up to the institution uses the instructional design that best meets their needs.

Table 7: Transcripts of the perspectives of the authors on the forum support in pedagogical practice

Tutor	Transcript of the answers on the forum that helps tutorial performance
I	Who coordinates the forum is Professor of the subject; Adding the tutor to the forum can lead to confusion among students.
II	Moderate better performance in the classroom.
III	The forum is an important tool for both teachers and students and for tutors because through this, interact with students and know each other's opinions.
IV	Yes, because through it we can clarify our doubts content.
V	Through the forum, it is possible to quantify the participation of students and clarify the main doubts.
VI	Mediation.
VII	Encouraging research.
VIII	Yes, you do know what doubts are.
IX	There is already a Professor forum; it is not necessary.

Source: data from the interview.

It is worth highlighting the consideration of the author VII, which highlights the motivation to research. In a way, it instigates students to read complementary bibliographies and exercise written in order to disseminate the information obtained. In a forum, student participation is noticed qualitatively and quantitatively by their interactions. Already in a conventional classroom, you can remain silent throughout the discipline.

However, the only written communication sometimes gives rise to small misunderstandings that would not occur in person. In this form of communication, one must be aware of the lack of human meta-language (Wittgenstein, 2000) and be more condescending. Therefore, the student and the educator to distance need to develop the necessary language skills (VILLARDI and OLIVEIRA,

2005) to read the messages of the forums, understand them and respond to them without raising any comprehension difficulty.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

When thinking of a VLE, numerous are the tools that a user has at his disposal. In this case study, we analyzed the perspective of a group of tutors of a private institution in São Paulo on the importance of mediation and interaction for the construction of knowledge in forums.

Opening a forum is an important moment in which the student must correctly understand what will be discussed. A way forward to mediate the forum, mentioned by some respondents, was to launch guiding questions to help the student to recognize the

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purpose of the debate and encourage the start of discussions.

While driving forum, the main mediation strategy utilized by the tutors was to encourage interaction among participants, although there are several ways to do it. Send warm individual messages and motivating the timid or inattentive students was another common mediation activity.

Respondents, in performing the closing of a forum, took into account the contributions of students and their interactions during the debate. For them, a proper closure would be a tutor message with a summary of the discussion.

Respondents highlighted the tutors students of resistance in using the forum for learning. Most did not participate constantly in discussions. The authors attribute this to the alleged student posture thought the student that a participation in the forum already would register its presence in the AVA. It is necessary to sensitize the student to contribute to the discussion and explain to him the importance of interaction to promote collaborative learning.

It is also necessary to establish criteria for evaluating participation, for the student realize the need to exchange ideas with colleagues and the tutor. The article brought a proposal of scoring criteria for the evaluation of student participation in the forums.

In general, the forum seemed an effective tool in supporting educational activities the distance run by tutors in the study institution by encouraging interaction and facilitate mediation, and can be used to answer questions.

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