



Article

The influence of empathy skills in e-learning tutor's performance

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ABSTRACT

The contribution of empathy for the tutor's performance in virtual learning environments was investigated. Perceptions of twelve on-line tutors from several courses offered at a private higher education institution in the State of Rio de Janeiro were taken into account. Half of those tutors successfully identified the meaning of empathy, despite they make a limited use of it. Ten tutors regarded an extrovert personality essential to nourish empathy from students. Nevertheless, all of them considered being a digital native or routinely engaging over virtual social networks irrelevant factors for promoting students' empathy. Most tutors placed empathy as the least important socio-affective competence for virtual teaching, after cordiality, honor, and willingness. Nevertheless, they recognized its potential for promoting partnership and confidence between tutor and student, which are relevant aspects in this educational modality.

Keywords: E-learning. Virtual teaching. Empathy. Digital native.

RESUMEN

Se investigó la contribución de la empatía con el papel de tutores a distancia en entornos virtuales de aprendizaje. Se consideraron las percepciones de los tutores de los cursos de grado de una universidad privada en el estado de Río de Janeiro. La mitad de los encuestados fué capaz de identificar el significado de la empatía, a pesar de poca utilidad en su práctica. Para decenas de tutores, tener personalidad saliente sería esencial para cautivar a la empatía de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, factores como ser nativo digital o tener el hábito de participar en las redes sociales virtuales serían irrelevantes para que los tutores lograsen la empatía de los estudiantes. En general, los tutores clasifican empatía como la habilidad socio-afectiva menos importante para el funcionamiento de la educación a distancia, detrás de la amabilidad, la honestidad y la aceptación. No obstante, se admitió su potencial para promover la complicidad y la confianza en la relación tutor-alumno, aspectos necesarios en esa forma de educación.

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Palabras clave: Educación a distancia. Tutoría. Empatía. Nativo digital.

RESUMO

A contribuição da empatia para a atuação de tutores a distância em ambientes virtuais de aprendizagem foi investigada. Foram consideradas as percepções de doze tutores de cursos de graduação de uma universidade privada no estado do Rio de Janeiro. Metade dos pesquisados foi capaz de identificar o significado de empatia, apesar de pouco a utilizarem em sua prática. Para dez dos tutores, ter personalidade extrovertida seria imprescindível para cativar a empatia dos alunos. Entretanto, fatores como ser nativo digital ou ter o hábito de participar de redes sociais virtuais seriam irrelevantes para que os tutores conquistassem a empatia dos estudantes. De maneira geral, os tutores classificaram a empatia como a competência socioafetiva menos importante para a atuação a distância, estando atrás de cordialidade, honradez e aceitação. Não obstante, admitiram seu potencial de promover a cumplicidade e a confiança na relação tutor-aluno, aspectos tão necessários nessa modalidade educacional.

Palavras-chave: Educação a distância. Tutoria. Empatía. Nativo digital.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary distance education (DE), diverse characters participate in the teaching-learning process, but among them, the tutor should be highlighted because of the close relationship established with the student (BELLONI, 2009; BORTOLOZZO et al., 2009; HACK, 2010; BERNARDINO, 2011; RAMOS, 2013).

The distance tutor generally carries multiple activities, which aim to guide, facilitate and motivate the construction of knowledge in virtual learning environments (VLE), among them: monitor and instigating student

participation in course activities, suggest sequences study of content, solve questions, help students with learning difficulties, promote debates and assist in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (BELLONI, 2009; BERNARDINO, 2011; TENÓRIO et al., 2014). The performance of such different functions demand pedagogical skills, technological, social-affective and managerial (MAIA, 2002; BELLONI, 2009; BERNARDINO, 2011; RAMOS, 2013; TENÓRIO, SOUTO; TENÓRIO, 2014).

Several authors emphasize social and emotional characteristics as essential to the distance tutor (ARETIO, 1994; FIUZA, 2002; SOUZA, 2004; OLIVEIRA, 2006; ANDRADE, 2007; TRACTENBERG; TRACTENBERG, 2007; VEDOVE; CAMARGO, 2008; OLIVEIRA, 2009; XAVIER; SILVA, 2009; FARIA, 2010; DORJÓ, 2011; NOBRE; MELO, 2011; BORGES; SOUZA, 2012; VENÂNCIO; MACEDO, 2012; COMPARIN, 2013; RAMOS, 2013; TEIXEIRA et al., 2015). However, few have tried to establish the list of social-affective skills needed to tutor (ARETIO, 2002; GIANNELLA et al., 2003; CUNHA; SILVA, 2009; POSSA, COMIN; OLIVEIRA, 2013). The relatively little dissemination of studies on the social-affective skills takes tutors ignore the way to apply them and even failing to recognize them within the context of distance education. Thus, important skills that should be learned and developed during their training, often have their application linked to the personality of each individual.

This study adopted the categorization of social-affective skills of the tutor at a distance proposed by Aretio (2002) and discussed by Giannella et al. (2003): Acceptance ability, friendliness, honesty and empathy. For these authors, the acceptance would be the tutor's ability to understand the heterogeneity of knowledge of students and help them feel active part of the teaching-learning process. The cordiality would be treat students with

receptivity, sensitivity, affection and respect, with the intention of encouraging self-confidence. Honesty would be act with ethics, integrity, responsibility, commitment and humility in order to create a mentor-student relationship based on trust and honesty. Finally, empathy would be the tutor's ability to identify and understand the emotions and transfigure the papers, seeking to know the individual needs of students.

The empathy as a tutor's ability is similarly described by Souza (2004) and Vedove and Camargo (2008). For that one, it would be the ability to take the person on the other and thus fertilize affectivity and communication in a social relationship. They describe it as the understanding of the student's needs, made possible only when the tutor imagine itself in his place. Dorjó (2011) provides a definition somewhat different: in the context of distance education, for the author, empathy would be equivalent to building, from the dialogue brokered by ICT, of affective bonds raised by positive feelings established despite the distance.

Although few authors seek to define or clarify the meaning given to empathy, many cite it as necessary to the tutor at a distance (FIUZA, 2002; OLIVEIRA, 2006; ANDRADE, 2007; XAVIER; SILVA, 2009; NOBRE; MELO, 2011; BORGES; SOUZA, 2012; VENÂNCIO; MACEDO, 2012; COMPARIN, 2013).

According to Andrade (2007), tutors with empathic profile establish a more intense relationship with the students, which contributes to creating a more harmonious environment. Venancio and Macedo (2012) reinforce the need for educator to be empathic:

(...) the teacher who is capable of a warm acceptance, which may have an unconditional positive acceptance and enter into a relationship of empathy with the reactions of fear, expectation and despondency that are present when facing a new

matter, have done a great deal to establish the learning conditions (VENÂNCIO; MACEDO, 2012, p. 3).

For example, a situation where the tutor could use empathy in their practice would be when the student needed information to develop a job, but did not know where or how to search (VEDOVE; CAMARGO, 2008). In this case, noting the anguish of the student and put yourself in their position, the tutor could act more humanely, without neglecting their desires, indicating appropriate magazines or sharing references. This will show affection, and to promote a climate of complicity.

Extol the achievements of the young student also requires tutor empathy and such action can improve the initiative and the students development, and set up a stimulus to overcome personal difficulties. When a tutor press other students in carrying out activities, placing of imposing manner, can have negative impacts (NOBRE; MELO, 2011). Knowing how to read between the lines what the student feels can make a difference; in some instances, for example, silence can mean or not empathy (KNOWLES et al., 1998; FIUZA, 2002).

Empathy is essential to preserving good relations in VLE, so that both the student and the tutor must exercise it. For Dorjó (2011), empathy, being intrinsic to human relationships, personal perceptions influence even in the teaching-learning process. In the case of students, for example, collaborative activities team would be favored by empathic postures as help in the control of emotions and impulses (NOBRE; MELO, 2011).

According to Vedove and Camargo (2008), empathy would be one of the first characteristics manifested by humans, but it needs to be exercised to thrive, or even to persist. The empathy involve three main skills: listening to others, help to develop and recognize the most influential individuals in the groups.

Fiuzza (2002) and Xavier and Silva (2009) reported still be required constant communication with the student, if possible almost daily, so that educator can foresee possible difficulties and afflictions.

The humanized tutoring through empathy favors learning because students feel free to externalize thoughts, expectations and anxieties, in order to make more dynamic and spontaneous interaction (VEN SILENCE; MACEDO, 2012). Thus, students begin to realize the tutor with a counselor able to support them and guide them in learning (VEDOVE; CAMARGO, 2008).

1. METHODOLOGY

In this article, the role of empathy was investigated as social affective competence in VLE based on the vision of a group of tutors. The research of the case study type was qualitative and was based on the perceptions of respondents. Data collection occurred in September 2013 in a private university located in the city of Nova Iguaçu, in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Twelve active tutors had been investigated in VLE undergraduate courses. Seven of them were female and five were between 30 and 40 years old. All were graduates - four in Education, two in Literature, one in Philosophy, one in Business, one in Social Care, one in Maths and one in Systems Analysis. A researched chose not to inform their training. Of this total, eleven made some graduate, half (six) had specific training course in mentoring area in distance and nine tutors worked between one and five years in distance education.

Tutors individually answered a mixed questionnaire with sixteen questions that addressed the humanized mentoring practices and social affective empathy skills .

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the total investigated tutors ten said they knew the social-affective skills of distance education. Of these, four had learned about them ongoing training for tutoring five during professional practice and one in the degree in Language. This result showed that the social-affective skills were not addressed currently in training tutors, which could influence the pedagogical practice. Although there were four teachers among participants, none had heard about them during graduation. Two tutors were not aware about the social-affective skills before the survey. Among them, one was a teacher and the other had training course for tutoring at a distance. Due to the spread of distance education, the skills needed to at a distance could appear even on the menu of upper level courses, such as the degree and the Faculty of Education.

Tutors were asked about the importance attached to social-affective skills. In general, they assigned little relevance to empathy in action at a distance compared to the warmth, acceptance and honesty, although it helps to create complicity in the tutor-student relationship, factor so necessary to an educational modality in which relations are deprived of personal contact. The friendliness was regarded as the most important competence.

Table 1 shows the perceptions of respondents about the meaning of empathy for the tutor at a distance. Half knew empathy as the ability to perceive the other and identify their needs, which is consistent with the definition proposed by Aretio (2002), Giannella et al. (2003), Souza (2004) and Vedove and Camargo (2008). A tutor, who said, in response to a previous question, was not aware of the social-affective skills, failed to recognize the significance of empathy based on the literature.

Table 1: Meaning of empathy based on the perceptions of tutors

MEANING OF EMPATHY	TOTAL
Accept and understand the reality of the student who, in their contacts with the tutor, should feel an active participant of the teaching-learning process.	0
Act kindly to treat students respectfully and sensitively, demonstrate sincerity and praise more the hits than errors.	4
Understand the other and identify their needs.	6
Keep humble posture with the student, and honest with yourself and with the student, in the certainty that there is no absolute holder of knowledge.	2

Four (33%) tutors confused empathy with warmth, though only one has admitted ignoring the social-affective skills. Two others, both without specific course tutor training, confused empathy honorably. In summary, half of those surveyed had differing perceptions as to the meaning of competence empathy in relation to suggested by Aretio (2002) and Giannella et al. (2003). There is possibility of perceptions have been influenced by academic training. Among these six, four were teachers with expertise but without specific ongoing course in tutoring.

In the sample, ten of the twelve respondents had one to five years experience as a tutor. Therefore, it was not possible to identify a correlation between the time of work and the evolution of the perception of empathy meaning.

After the question about the meaning of empathy is answered, the definitions of the four social-affective skills as Aretio (2002) and Giannella et al. (2003), were clarified the searched without allowing them to change the response. The aim was to ensure the understanding of empathy in answers to subsequent questions.

Table 2: Times when the tutors judged empathy as essential

MOMENTS THAT EMPATHY WOULD BE ESSENTIAL	TOTAL
In the development of collective work, which should be based on dialogue, debate, confrontation, in the discussion of views and, especially, mutual respect due to cultural diversity.	2
Must be present at the time of receiving the students at the beginning of each module of the course, to make them feel welcome, respected, comfortable and encouraged to continue their journey in a pleasant way, developing a confidence atmosphere.	3
By the time the student needs assistance to perform the task, realizing their distress, the tutor can guide him/her so that he/she gets the necessary understanding to carry out the activity, thus acting, human and affective way.	7
When you recognize that you are unaware about certain subject and the need for research to provide an answer to the student, being the mediator of learning.	0

Table 2 shows times when the tutors judged indispensable empathy. Seven (58%) feel empathy necessary to act human and affective way when the student is distressed while

performing tasks. Of these, two have training in Education. In fact, the ability to perceive the other and identify with their needs would help in these situations.

Three tutors (25%) consider the necessary empathy to host the student at the beginning of each module, two graduates in Language. Two (17%) repute empathy important for a collective work.

They were investigated further, which problematic situations arising in tutoring at a distance could be resolved with empathy (Table 3). Perceptions of the tutors were very varied:

Table 3: Possible problem situations to be overcome with empathy in perception of the tutors

PROBLEMATIC SITUATION CAN BE OVERCOME WITH EMPATHY	TOTAL
Low participation of the whole class in the VLE	2
Low participation in VLE for a particular student	2
Peer aggression from one discipline	2
Low interaction with colleagues	5
Disincentive	3
Difficulty in the teaching-learning process	4
Little contact with the tutor	4
Presumption of the student	3
Questioning the competence of the tutor	4

According to five (42%) surveyed, low interaction with colleagues teacher students could be solved with empathic attitudes. But this would involve empathy among the course participants themselves, not being seen as a characteristic only of tutoring.

The difficulty in the teaching-learning process, the little contact with the tutor and the questioning of their technical competence were appointed, each of four participants and situations that could be resolved by empathy. Three (25%) of them also stressed the disincentive and the student the presumption as difficulties to be faced.

Low participation in the VLE of a the student in particular or the whole class and peer aggression from one discipline were mentioned, each for two (16%) surveyed.

As noted, six of tutors expressed contrasting perceptions of the meaning of competence empathy against the proposed by Aretio (2002) and Giannella et al. (2003). However, dissension seemed to have no impact on the teaching practice of respondents, regardless of association between the term empathy and canonical definition (Table 1), as the six said to make use of empathy at different times and problematic situations without distinction of others (Tables 2 e 3).

The empathy promotes fellowship in tutor-student relationship (Aretio, 2002). In distance education, human relations are deprived of personal contact. The distance can be a barrier, particularly for people of generations prior to the said young digital natives. However, for eight tutors (67%) included in the group of digital natives, this feature does not reveal it easier to win the empathy of the teacher students (Figure 1).

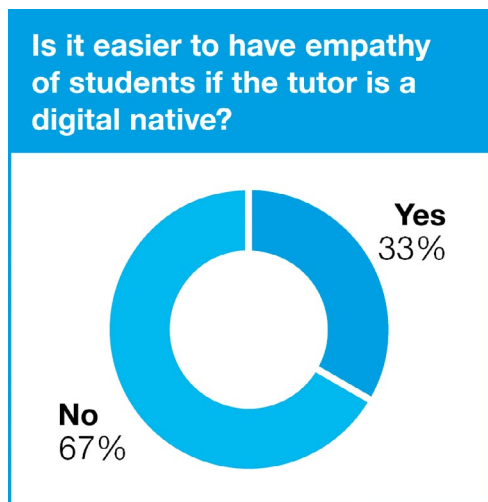


Figure 1: Tutors' perceptions of getting empathy from the students may or may not be easier when the tutor is a digital native

In the view of respondents, the course participants can have all kinds of personality and the fact that distance education using various technological resources does not guarantee the achievement of their empathy.

Table 4 shows personal characteristics that tutors believed enhance empathy between them and the course participants. For those surveyed, the fact that the tutor or the student be digital native does not matter to be empathetic; only a tutor (8%) judged the fact that the student be a digital native as relevant to an empathic interaction in relations of distance education. The qualitative analysis of individual responses showed there is clear link between searched to identify the meaning of empathy and the selected items. The same occurred with the data relating to Figures 1 and 2.

Table 4: Trait that most enhances empathy between the tutor and the student

WHAT MORE WOULD INCREASE EMPATHY BETWEEN THE TUTOR AND THE STUDENT?	TOTAL
Extroverted personality of the tutor	10
Extroverted personality of the student	4
The tutor being a digital native	0
The student being a digital native	1

Ten (83%) tutors see the extroverted personality of the tutor as essential to increase the complicity and trust with student. According to them, it is well known the fact that students generally rely more on those who feel some kind of connection. This relationship would be enhanced by an extroverted personality, as favoring communication.

According to three surveyed, the extroverted personality of the tutor and course participants help promote empathy. One of them considered only extroversion of student as sufficient.

The use of social networks (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) is common today. However ten tutors (83%) said that the habit of relating to social networks would not improve the chances of naturally get the empathy of the course participants (Figure 2). An assumption for this result would be the tutors feel that the informal language, contumacious in these media, it would not be appropriate to collaborative learning environment of modern distance education. Two (17%) of them said that the interaction of the tutor with course participants by social networks facilitate the achievement of these empathy.

Only two tutors, among the twelve surveyed, narrated a problematic situation that managed to get around with the use of social-affective skills. This may indicate the limited

use of such skills across the pedagogical, technological and management.

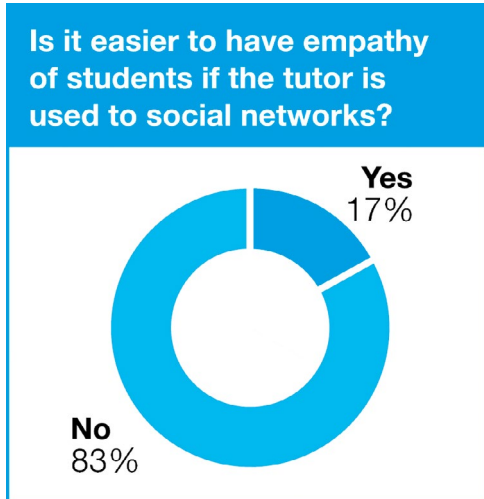


Figura 2: Tutors' perceptions of getting empathy from the students easily if they were used to social networks.

A tutor, graduated in Pedagogy and specialist in educational and literacy Guidance reported that faced with ironic expressions of course participants in the VLE and it was necessary flexibility and ethical to overcome the situation. Another, a teacher with a degree in Systems Analysis, said the occurrence of unauthorized copy, the student posted a message on Internet as if it were his own. The tutor did not report a specific social affective competence to deal with the occurrence, but honesty, probably would have helped to deal with this issue because Aretio (2002) points out that the action of a tutor guided by the honesty presupposes true and authentic attitudes in relation to the student.

CONCLUSIONS

The tutor of contemporary distance education must build a reciprocal relationship and fellowship with the student through social-affective skills. For Aretio (2002) and Giannella et al. (2003), the process of teaching and distance learning would be favored by acceptance, warmth, empathy, and honesty.

The perceptions of twelve tutors about the role of empathy in tutor-student relationship were analyzed. The empathy lies in understanding other people's emotions to identify their needs and expectations (Aretio, 2002; GIANNELLA et al., 2003). However, half of respondents gave disparate perceptions of the meaning of empathy when they saw it as another competence - friendliness or honesty.

The divergence in perceptions in six respondents could result from deficiencies in their pedagogical training to operate in tutoring at a distance. After all, five of them reported having known the social-affective skills only when the professional exercise. However, the data collected not aimed to deepen the influence of tutorial training; other researches can add further information.

However, another point of view it seems more likely to explain that is the apparent discrepancy between theory and empirical reality. It would not be appropriate to set aside the Aretio definitions (2002) and Giannella et al. (2003) for the social-affective skills, but to enjoy them together, holistically. From this synthetic perspective, dissenting responses not represent ignorance, misunderstanding or even occupational disability. It would only be a reflection of the inherent indivisibility of social-affective skills in teaching and distance learning. The plurality of ways to exercise them is a direct consequence of the wealth of human relationships. The tutor must therefore value the affection to be able to reach and sensitize the student away.

The perceptions of course participants of distance education about empathy would be a complementary research topic to understand how this social affective skills would influence the interaction among classmates. To analyze the course participants on stance forums and other ICT in order to measure how empathy contribute to collaborative learning, could also reveal other particularly interesting aspects related to the topic.

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