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Artigo

THE DISTANCE LEARNING TUTOR AND HIS/HER TRAINING TO WORK IN VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at describing the implementation of a tutor training course enabling them to work in virtual learning environments of Distance Education (DE) programs offered by a federal higher education institution in the State of Rio de Janeiro. It also presents a brief review of the literature on the subject, as well as the tutor skills considered essential for students to be able to learn autonomously. These theoretical contributions serve as a support for us to discuss the model chosen for the Distance Education Tutor Training Course offered by such institution. Through an exploratory study of the course participants, we found that the course is an efficient training strategy for people who intend to work in distance education, more specifically, as distance tutors. We also found the course is in line with the proposals suggested in the literature.

Keywords: Tutoring. Tutor Training Course. Distance Education.

formación de tutores para actuar en ambientes virtuales de aprendizaje de cursos en la modalidad Educación a Distancia (EaD), ofrecido por una institución federal de enseñanza superior ubicada en el Estado de Río de Janeiro. Presenta, también, una breve revisión de la literatura sobre el tema, así como las habilidades consideradas indispensables al tutor para que se realice un aprendizaje autónomo del educando. Esas contribuciones teóricas sirven de soporte para discutir sobre el modelo escogido para el Curso de Formación de Tutores para Educación a Distancia (CFREaD), ofrecido por tal institución. Por medio de un estudio exploratorio involucrando a los participantes del curso, fue posible observar que el CFREaD se presenta como una eficiente estrategia de formación para profesionales que pretenden actuar en la modalidad a distancia, estando en consonancia con las propuestas sugeridas en la literatura consultada.

Palabras clave: Tutoría. Formación de Tutores. Educación a Distancia.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo relatar la experiencia de la implantación de un curso de

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem como objetivo relatar a experiência da implantação de um curso de

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formação de tutores para atuar em ambientes virtuais de aprendizagem de cursos na modalidade Educação a Distância (EaD) oferecido por uma instituição federal de ensino superior situada no Estado do Rio de Janeiro. São apresentadas ainda, uma breve revisão da literatura sobre o tema, bem como as habilidades consideradas indispensáveis ao tutor para que ocorra uma aprendizagem autônoma do educando. Essas contribuições teóricas servem de suporte para discutir o modelo escolhido para o Curso de Formação de Tutores para Educação a Distância (CFTEaD), oferecido pela instituição. Por meio de um estudo exploratório envolvendo os participantes do curso, foi possível observar que o CFTEaD se apresenta como uma eficiente estratégia de formação para profissionais que pretendem atuar na modalidade a distância, mais especificamente, como tutores a distância, estando em consonância com as propostas sugeridas na literatura consultada.

Palavras-chave: Tutoria. Formação de Tutores. Educação a Distância.

INTRODUCTION

Today we live in a world where the search for new knowledge is no longer a matter of culture but instead of survival in the job market. As competition becomes fiercer and fiercer, only those who are most skilled and capable of handling emerging issues that usually require the use of technologies manage to stay afloat.

In the past few years, access to information was substantially increased mostly through internet use. Distance education (DE) is one of the major benefits afforded by the virtual network, as it provides access to education for people who had not attended classroom-based programs because of financial issues, logistics, or incompatible study-work hours.

In Brazil, DE was established by the Brazilian Law of Education Guidelines and

Bases – Law no. 9394 of December 20, 1996 –, later on regulated by Decree no. 5622 of 2005. Recently, via Resolution no. 1 of February 3, 2016, the Basic Education Chamber of the National Education Council set nationwide guidelines for school accreditation and the offer of basic education online programs (high school, technical vocational education, and youngster and adult education). Up until then, distance education was primarily on offer for undergraduate programs, specialists' degrees, and professional Master's degrees.

In internet-using DE, teaching and learning usually take place in virtual learning environments (VLEs) that offer tools whose purpose is to provide students with an environment that goes beyond virtually reproducing a face-to-face classroom to include a host of possibilities opened up by the use of educational technologies. The entire teaching-learning process takes place through these environments as students and tutors constantly interact.

In order to further develop distance education by expanding and internalizing the offer of higher education programs and courses in the country, Decree 5800 of June 8, 2006, created the system called *Universidade Aberta do Brasil* (UAB), whose members include public federal, state, and city universities and the Federal Institutes of Education, Science and Technology. These institutions are entrusted with running a given program to be offered in a given area, which has face-to-face support hubs in place to which students can turn to discuss their content-related and administrative issues. These hubs are usually managed by city administrations or state governments. In virtual environments, students usually find tutors are their go-to people for matters related to program and study contents.

A range of authors is found in the literature who have addressed the actions and behaviors required for tutors to be able to

make sure students' learning is meaningful. However, for these actions and behaviors to take place, it is essential that tutor training courses train them properly.

Therefore, it is paramount to discuss tutor training courses so as to contribute to an in-depth analysis of this topic. The purpose of this paper is to address the figure of tutors and their training in order to answer the following questions:

Do tutors get training compatible with their importance in the DE teaching-learning process? Do training courses address the actions and behaviors required for tutors to efficiently do their job?

In an effort to discuss these questions, in 2012 and via the Tutoring General Coordination Office at a federal higher education institution in Rio de Janeiro, we proposed a DE Tutor Training Course (*Curso de Formação de Tutores em EaD - CFTEaD*). This paper presents such course, along with its structure and some of its results observed by the authors hereof through discussion forums and assignments done by enrollees, most of whom were teachers or people interested in working in education. Before presenting the CFTEaD, we mention a few authors whose theories support the choices made for the course structure and which provide offer guiding parameters for our observations. Lastly, in our final considerations we discuss a few points we found to be positive and others which need to be improved on in subsequent versions of the course, based on what we observed from this experience.

DE TUTOR TRAINING

Giannella, Struchiner, and Ricciardi (2003) point out that the essence of face-to-face and distance education is the same. However, they highlight that distance education carries specific features that must be studied and discussed for the educational

process taking place in a virtual environment to yield good results. On that account, distance tutors have different characteristics from teachers working in classroom-based programs, and such specific features must be taken into account in their training.

Medeiros et al. (2010) say that study autonomy is a very important requirement in distance education. However, autonomy must not be taken for alienation or loneliness. Additionally, the physical distance between those involved in this teaching-learning process keeps students from meeting with teachers to discuss the questions they may have, unlike what happens in classroom-based education.

Hence, the presence of an adviser is necessary. Someone capable of observing and helping these students along the road towards building their knowledge. Therefore, a new concept is created, a new professional, a new role in the act of educating: the tutor (SCHLOSSER, 2010). Tutors are meant to be the students' partner and encourage them to learn autonomously as they seek to build their knowledge and in research activities (BELLONI, 2003). Tutors must also fully master the theories related to the contents to be worked on, as well as master and properly handle the technological tools that will be used in the course (ESQUINCALHA and ABAR, 2014). We should further point out that tutors are more than chaperons working for the system. They play an essential role in enrollee's learning process and should be seen as teachers who also have technical knowledge of DE tutoring (RICCIO et al., 2007).

Aretio (2001) highlights a few characteristics he believes are essential for working as a distance tutor: cordiality, acceptance, integrity, empathy, and "the ability to conduct intelligent listening/reading." According to the author, cordiality is associated with making enrollees feel comfortable. Acceptance is related to understanding their circumstances. Integrity ensures permanent honesty in tutors'

relationship with enrollees. Finally, empathy is about building closer bonds. These qualities underscore the relevance of kindness as an important component of distance tutoring, where enrollees oftentimes feel alone and dropout rates are relatively high.

An international study on distance tutoring carried out in five countries at the same time is discussed in a paper by Preti and Oliveira (2004). Its purpose was to understand several aspects of tutors' work through their "discourse practices." Additionally, the authors looked into the tutor profile, their foreseen, perceived, carried out, and desired roles, as well as their level of satisfaction with their job. Aretio (2001) destaca algumas características que considera fundamentais para o exercício da tutoria a distância: cordialidade, aceitação, honradez, empatia e "a capacidade de desenvolver uma escuta/leitura inteligentes". Segundo o autor, a cordialidade está associada a deixar o cursista confortável. Já a aceitação está relacionada à compreensão de sua realidade. A honradez diz respeito à honestidade permanente na relação com o cursista. Por fim, a empatia se relaciona com o estreitar dos laços. Essas qualidades ressaltam a relevância do afeto como um componente importante no exercício da tutoria a distância, visto que nessa modalidade, o cursista muitas vezes se sente sozinho e as taxas de evasão são relativamente altas.

According to the authors, distance tutor training should have a more clearly stated goal. Most tutors pointed out "leading enrollees to think and answered their questions by themselves" as their main role. On the other hand, they answered "answering questions" to the question "what do you do most often at work?" Another relevant point mentioned as the research conclusion is that it is also important for tutors to help design the course they will be working on so that they may experience its essence by serving as coauthors of the process.

Given the foregoing about the importance of tutors, proper tutor training becomes relevant and they need to be offered courses capable of preparing them for the specific practices required by distance education, particularly in virtual learning environments.

Some tutor training courses have been offered at an extension, qualification, or specialization level. However, they are not enough to meet the needs of this ever growing sort of education. Nunes (2007) says that, because distance education is relatively recent, few are the people prepared to work in this field, and most of those involved in it came into it straight from formal or classroom-based education programs.

In such backdrop, Pimentel (2008) reports that the literature discusses the profile of tutors, but there is little focus on what kind of training they should get so they may become a true link between students and knowledge.

That being so, we can turn to Cassol (2002), who addresses distance education tutor training and what is expected from such courses. The author says tutor training must include the fundamentals, methodology, and structure of DE systems to support the pedagogical bases of learning about the behavior of adults.

Esquinalha and Abar (2014) discuss about proposing a tutor training model based on the TPACK³ framework (MISHRA and KOEHLER, 2006). They highlight how important it is to master the technological tools inherent to VLE work, the pedagogical issues regarding the training of tutors, who are adults and have specific needs, and that they master the content they will be working on. These authors further point out that these three sets of knowledge are not independent. Quite the opposite, they blend into one another and

³ Acronym for Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge.

give rise to technological pedagogical content knowledge. Additionally, Esquinalha (2015) says tutors must be specifically trained to develop affective and behavioral components to deal with distance education students.

Other authors, such as Bairral (2005) and Aretio (2001), also highlight affectivity is important in tutors' work and point out they should carry themselves with cordiality, acceptance, integrity, empathy, and "the ability to conduct intelligent listening/reading." These characteristics reflect how important the affective component is when tutoring online, as enrollees tend to feel lonely and dropout rates are relatively high (ESQUINCALHA, 2015)..

REPORT ON AN EXPERIENCE AND A FEW DISCUSSIONS

This paper presents the online Distance Education Tutor Training Course (*Curso de Formação de Tutores em Educação a Distância - CFTEaD*) offered by a federal higher education institution to the following target audience: graduates and students graduating from *lato sensu* online graduate programs run by the UAB System.

The CFTEaD began in the first term of 2012 and its purpose was to bring together theory and practice. It allowed students to not only think about and discuss topics such as DE fundamentals, the importance of tutors' role in online courses, tutoring systems, and DE evaluations, but also to experiment in a virtual learning environment (VLE) under a tutor profile, that is, in a practice environment designed especially for such purpose. All these activities were conducted on the MOODLE platform. Resources for the teaching-learning process included forums and sending in assignments completed after reading, discussing, and reflecting on the reference texts available on the platform.

The CFTEaD was offered as a 60-hour free course from March 31 to May 25, 2012, over a

total of 8 course weeks. Course weeks would always begin on Wednesdays and end the following Tuesdays, which ensured students could access the classes both on weekdays and weekends. Enrollment in this course totaled 590 students split into 23 groups. Each group comprised approximately 26 students and a tutor to guide them through the activities proposed for these weeks, so as not to compromise student-tutor and student-student interaction. These tutors were DE specialists with at least three years' experience on the job. They were selected based on assessments by the General Coordination Office for Online Graduate Program Tutoring at the institution where they had been working for some time.

To pass the course, enrollees were required to obtain a final score equal to or higher than 70 points, which was the arithmetic mean of the summed up marks received for forum discussions and assignments. Forums and assignments were about emerging topics in the field of tutoring which were furthered by enrollees' studying and discussing the relevant texts. The assignments comprised individual essays about the same topics discussed on the forums.

In addition to the specific activities mentioned in the previous paragraph, in the 7th week enrollees were given the chance to make up for a forum they missed or an assignment they had not sent in in the first six weeks of the CFTEaD.

The first week of the course was set aside for students to introduce themselves on the *Participant introduction* forum and get acquainted with the VLE. In addition to that, a wiki was made available whose topic was: *A tutor's story*, where all enrollees added elements to a story initiated by each group's tutor and which would be later edited and posted for all to access on the weekend. A wiki is a tool that allows for the collaborative construction of texts in a virtual medium. It is a native Moodle platform tool.

Also during the first week, videos on the CFTEaD and welcome messages to enrollees were posted as well, along with the Student Handbook, a DE collective construction glossary, a folder called Course Library containing additional texts for the debates held over the eight weeks, and finally, three links called: *News forum* (messages to enrollees from the coordination office, not open to interaction), *Speaking with the tutor* (an interaction forum on administrative issues between tutor and enrollees, per groups), and *Virtual Coffee* (a tutor mediation-free forum where enrollees from all groups could interact freely, as long as they abided by the rules of acceptable behavior). All of the items described in this paragraph remained active throughout the course.

The topic for the second week was *Distance Education: concepts and potential*. A forum was set up asking enrollees to talk about positive and negative situations they had experienced in DE, aided by a reference text on distance education concepts and potential (*Educação a Distância: conceitos e potencialidades*, GIANNELLA and STRUCHINER, 2005). As all enrollees had come from online programs, they had the chance to hold important discussions about good virtual environment practices. Overall, the negative experiences were related to a lack of empathy and cordiality by some tutors, something corroborated by Esquincalha's studies (2015) about the importance of affective and behavioral components to keep students from dropping out of online programs. With respect to positive situations, most enrollees mentioned the ability to study anywhere at any time.

Concurrently with the topical forum, the week's assignment had enrollees write an essay on three of the negative experiences mentioned in the forum and propose solutions. Once again, emotional aspects generally prevailed.

In the third week, it was time to address the topic *Tutoring systems in distance*

education. The topic was discussed in the dedicated forum where enrollees were asked to analyze the tutoring systems run by seven institutions offering distance education. For ethical reasons, the institutions' names were not disclosed.

The respective literature comprised two texts available from the platform: *Guia do Tutor dos Cursos de Pós-Graduação* (ESQUINCALHA, 2010) and *Sistemas de Tutores em Cursos de Pós-Graduação a Distância* (ESQUINCALHA et al., 2009). These texts look into tutoring systems run under high quality standards according to distance education quality criteria published by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (*Referenciais de Qualidade para Educação Superior a Distância*, MEC, 2007). Some systems featured online and face-to-face tutors working with groups of up to 25 students, while other tutoring systems had only one tutor available for approximately 500 students and who answered their questions on discussion forums, which is unfathomable to us. The week's assignment asked enrollees to suggest, based on the texts and their own experiences, a tutoring system that seemed effective considering the quality parameters discussed in the related literature.

Discussions in the 4th week were based on the topic *The importance of the tutor's role in distance education*. The reference text for this debate was on lessons learned from distance tutoring experiences, namely drivers and limiters (*Lições aprendidas em experiências de tutoria a distância: fatores potencializadores e limitantes*, GIANNELLA et al., 2003). The purpose for that week's discussions was to learn a bit more about the actions and behaviors expected from tutors facing conflict situations they may come across in the learning environment. As the week's assignment, enrollees were asked to write an essay describing what they would do when faced with some problem situations (depicted in a manner that showed the consequences of each

one of them) tutors may come across in their everyday routine. As input for this assignment, enrollees were offered a supporting text addressing the following situations: 1) tutor facing technical issues related to the virtual environment; 2) tutor is required to mediate a conflict between enrollees; 3) tutor disagrees with the ideas in the text the coordinator suggested for discussion; 4) tutor facing enrollees more knowledgeable than him/her about the topic being discussed; 5) tutor forced to deal with excess affection and harassment on discussion forums; 6) virtual silence.

As they began their 5th course week, enrollees were given the topic *Performance Assessment in DE*. Based on texts *O tutor-professor e a avaliação da aprendizagem no ensino a distância* (GUSSO, 2009), on tutors and evaluating online learning, and *Avaliação de fóruns de discussão* (DOMINGUES, 2006), about evaluating discussion forums, enrollees used the forum to discuss the evaluation criteria they should use to evaluate a forum and the reasons for their choices. As their assignment, enrollees were asked to describe the types and forms of assessment they used to use in classroom-based education and think about whether they could be used in distance education.

The 6th course week, whose topic was *Editing Resources and Assignments on the MOODLE Platform – Experimenting*, allowed enrollees to learn more about the platform's editing features. To do that, an exclusive practice environment was created for them to operate the main tools the platform has.

To encourage enrollees to handle and interact with the practice environment, they were asked to choose a subject related to a discipline in which they were interested and create a topic about some subject belonging to such discipline. The topic was to contain a title, a brief introductory text, a text file, a forum, and an assignment (sending a single file).

To support them, enrollees had a forum available to them where they could ask questions about the Moodle platform; four tutorials on how to edit topics, create forums, and add and remove activities and resources; a step-by-step on how to create the items required by their assignment; and the reference text *Manual do MOODLE – Perfil de Professor* (Equipe do Projeto EAD – CPD – MOODLE UFBA, 2008).

In the second to last week of this course, version 2012, the topic proposed was *Virtual Learning Environments and the MOODLE Platform*. The focus of that week was to discuss the type of approach used in different DE platforms (Teleduc, Aulanet, Moodle etc.). In addition to this forum, students were also assigned to write a paper where they should provide tips for using at least four of the platform's tools. That week they also had the chance to make up for an assignment they had failed to complete in the first six weeks.

To help enrollees out, two reference texts were provided: *Uma introdução aos Ambientes Virtuais de Aprendizagem* (SALVADOR, 2010), introducing VLEs, and *Definição de um ambiente de cursos para ensino/aprendizagem de Estatística via Internet* (RODRIGUES, 2002), on online statistics education environments.

Finally, the last week was set aside for students to evaluate the course. In the forum opened for that purpose, three items were to be addressed: Course evaluation; Tutor evaluation; and Enrollee participation evaluation.

It was found that participation rates in Weeks 1, 6, and 8 were lower than in other weeks, which was already expected given that the first week was meant solely for enrollees to introduce themselves, while in weeks 6 and 8 the forums were dedicated exclusively for students to ask questions about the platform and evaluate the course, respectively.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper reports on the experience that implemented a DE tutor training course at a federal higher education institution located in the state of Rio de Janeiro. We found that the course had its hour load and activities organized into weekly periods, which is in accordance with the ideas put forward by the supporting literature and was positively evaluated by most students.

Additionally, the sequence in which the topics were addressed: Participant introduction; What is Distance Education, pros and cons; Tutoring systems; The importance of tutors' role in online courses, Distance education evaluations; Moodle platform practice; and Constructivist approaches found in virtual learning environments, seems to have been successful, judging from student evaluation scores.

We also found that the course features exclusive channels for tutor and student communication, in addition to topical forums that allow for collaborative learning via discussions and tutor-student and student-student interactivity, considering the interpersonal relationships between group participants. It should also be noted that the Virtual Coffee link allows all enrollees to socialize with one another, regardless of which group they belong to, which was pointed out as positive.

The fact the participants had access to a practice environment where they were able to edit and create topics in the VLE, gave them hands-on contact with it and consequently a better understanding of how courses are created on that platform.

In the 2013 CFTEaD, besides putting their technical knowledge of Moodle editing to the test, students took part in a mediation round where each one of them had the chance to mediate a discussion on the forum they had created, over the course of two to

three days. To that end, each group of enrollees was split into a few subgroups so that all students would get the chance to experience, albeit briefly, mediating a discussion forum. In 2014, that stage was extended from one to about three weeks. That way, in addition to the technological knowledge, the ever essential pedagogical and technological pedagogical knowledge (MISHRA and KOEHLER, 2006) was brought into the mix to join the affective and behavioral components.

Upon analyzing the Evaluation item, we found the course features a specific topic where this issue is discussed. That is because evaluating is something that tends to lead to controversy-laden discussions, both in classroom-based and distance education. With respect to that item, we also found that the very course offers various manners in which participants can be evaluated, such as through their participation in forums, collaborative text construction (wiki), and written assignments.

Judging from the students' comments, we can say that they were fairly happy about the CFTEaD and that the course had met their needs. Several students suggested that an anonymous form outside the platform should be used instead of a forum, which was analyzed by the coordinators and put in place in subsequent versions.

Finally, it should be noted that the authors of this paper do not advocate or believe there is a single efficient model for distance tutor training. However, given the offer of some versions of the course examined herein was successful according to evaluations by coordinators and enrollees, we believed it would be pertinent to share the experience so that it may be discussed and improved by the people in charge of distance tutor training at the various institutions that have taken upon themselves to face this important and complex challenge.

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