Lifelong learning online tutoring methodology approach

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Abstract: This paper is presented to show how to manage one of the main quality items in any e-learning initiative, that is to say, online tutoring. In fact, the success or deception of the learning activity depends, to a great extent, on the right planning of tutorial activity. In this paper we will show the main skills, methods and quality items related to the key teaching work for developing quality learning courses, i.e. tutoring online.

Keywords: academic success; e-learning; lifelong learning; quality management; skills in e-learning; teaching methodology; training of trainers; online tutor.

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1   Introduction

It is quite clear that e-learning entailed a real revolution in the way we understand distance learning, and to define e-learning itself as a particular distance learning modality by its own nature and special characteristics, according to the opinion of several experts in this field (Marcelo et al., 2002; Ruipérez, 2003).

Nevertheless, nowadays there are some opinions that disagree to this initial and commonly accepted consideration of e-learning. In fact, by identifying distance learning and e-learning we will produce a depreciation of this learning modality, precisely because the identification between both realities restricts many of the new capabilities that e-learning should bring forward to the practice of network learning (even in a 'classic' distance learning situation), the capabilities that are really closer to in-classroom learning contexts, even surmounting many of the barriers inherent to in-classroom situations (interaction possibility, social knowledge building, etc.).

High-interaction capability and moving of learning centre (from teacher or contents to student) constitute two issues that clearly make the difference from e-learning both to distance learning and to 'classic' in-classroom learning, just to point at two commonly assumed evidences (elearningeuropa.info, 2005). In e-learning initiatives, communications schemes evolve from a 'one-to-one' interaction (distinctive of distance learning) and from 'one-to-many' (characteristic of in-person contexts) to a network

communication scheme, that is to say, 'many-to-many'; moreover, in distance learning courses, student is the learning centre because he/she is the only one responsible of absorbing the contents given, whereas in in-classroom initiatives the most of the responsibilities are with teacher's communication competence.

Athwart to the other learning situations where there is a pre-eminence of student or teacher in order to define the learning core, in e-learning (as we try to define it just here) there is a halfway situation where student plays a very important role, not as a single individual but collectively as a group member, since he/she is a part of the community; but at the same time, there is an underlying teaching role that is the keystone and acts as a catalyst of the whole teaching-to-learning process, according to this e-learning excellence model conception. This role is the one developed by online tutor.

Therefore, given this *hybrid* nature of e-learning itself, it seems quite evident that e-learning is a learning modality capable to be applied on several and various application contexts, from classical in-classroom situations (where e-learning is also possible) to traditional distance learning. Besides, it favours the arising of new professional roles, that is, in the technological fields as in corporative and teaching contexts (García Peñalvo et al., 2006a).

Lifelong learning is undoubtedly one of the learning contexts where a highest claim and a significant growth on demanding e-learning solutions are currently observed, which also applies for purely distance or non-presence and for blended initiatives. However, it is important to highlight that, after an initial phase of 'technological fascination' and self-learning with an unsatisfactory balance, corporations and public administrations prefer the initiatives characterised by dynamic and strong tutorial presence (Santillana Formación, 2005), because it is thought that learning success and quality should be better ensured by establishing learning experiences with these characteristics. This is the context where further issues should be considered.

First, the quality concept applied to e-learning will be analysed, and then it is shown how relevant human factor will be to determine the quality and excellence in this learning modality. This human factor role should be focused mainly on online tutor's role.

Second, we will develop the different modalities for tutoring intervention in network learning initiatives, which are the main skills and competences demonstrated by tutors in their work; these skills and competences will be ensured in their training period. 'Tecnologías y Métodos de Formación en Red: Tutor online', Lifelong learning diploma of the University of Salamanca constitutes a case study of such a quality training programme.

Finally, some specific issues of e-learning in lifelong learning contexts will be illustrated, enriched with the information that shows the significance of e-learning as a strategic decision to improve it in lifelong learning initiatives.

2 Quality in e-learning: a definition

More than a decade has passed from the first network training experiences; and although the most of the institutions in our contexts are just beginning their experience with e-learning right now (or its course is relatively recent), it is possible to obtain some general conclusion.

The first question, a reflection shared among the experts in the field, is that the results obtained by this first e-learning experiences were not so good as expected, both in

quantitative and in qualitative terms. At least, the digital revolution or technological panacea favoured by time flexibility and non-spatial links (characteristic from e-learning initiatives, among other promising issues) provoked such expectations as to consider the results given a real disappointment (Seoane Pardo and Lamamie, 2005). The 'first e-learning generation' was marked by the improvement of technical infrastructures, the development of thereabout-efficient communication tools and digitalising of learning contents brought from a traditional context to an online environment. With all these elements available (networks and computers, applications and contents), it is possible to constitute a learning model presumably suited to the social exigency of 'anytime' and 'anywhere' learning courses. However, this is not enough at all.

The (so-called for us) 'second e-learning generation' should be defined for seeking the highest quality and the development of a previous quality model to which applications, contents and even human factor (teaching roles and students) will be fitted. And, many institutions are currently re-orientating their initial strategy, being aware that the learning model they were based upon in the foregoing generation (partly imposed by the tools available, partly by the influence of in-person learning models) is not sustainable anymore, and they are now looking for their *online identity* to achieve the desired goals. According to this *identity*, applications, contents and didactical strategies are rightly defined.

The concept of *quality*, in so far as it refers to a complex learning context, depends in this case on these five factors: technology, services, evaluation/accreditation, contents, human factor (tutoring) (García Peñalvo, 2006). The ISO (ISO 8402: 1986, 3.1) defines 'quality' as follows: 'The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs'. By matching these two ideas, we define quality in e-learning as *the effective acquisition of a suit of skills, knowledge and competences by students, by means of developing appropriate learning contents given with a sum of efficient web tools supported via a net of value-added services, whose process – from content developing to the acquisition of competences and the analysis of the whole intervention – is ensured by an exhaustive and personalised evaluation and certification process, and it is monitored by a human team practising a strong and integral tutorial presence through the whole teaching-to-learning process.*

By applying this definition to the so-called second e-learning generation, it seems quite evident that achieving a particular quality model nowadays concerns the most of the institutions that attained this phase of development for e-learning solutions. But 'quality' should be understood not only as web tools efficiency but also as quality on services and, of course, on learning contents. Moreover, the assessment systems, although they are not ever optimal, are being permanently improved. Nevertheless, the most important quality factor, the only one that is capable to amalgamate and sum up all the quality issues even by ensuring coherence to the whole process, is the effective presence of a human factor held by the online tutor. But how should we guarantee the highest quality of human factor on e-learning initiatives?

3   Human factor as quality guarantee: online tutoring

With regard to e-learning, it is commonly forgotten that it is not only '*e*' but also, and over all, *learning* experience. Therefore, it is paradoxical that most of the discussions concerning e-learning are focused on technical elements over human activity, and this

implies discussing about the means instead of the aims, so we are forgetting the real purpose of any learning experience.

This paradox should be due to any of these considerations, both false:

1   the significance of human factor in e-learning experiences decreases with regard to technical mediation, and so it is secondary

2   there is no need to seek a specific methodology for e-learning, because distance learning methods are the same of e-learning ones.

On the contrary, it is fundamental to create and define the appropriate 'gaming rules' in order to ensure a relevant space for human factor among all the issues involved on e-learning process; this space, however, should not be a marginal space, but a privileged one and with the most responsibility. In fact, learning (in any of its possible modalities) is just a human interaction activity, which could be mediated (by a blackboard or a Learning Management System – LMS) or not, but the mediation tools are mere instruments serving communication anyway, and training (and, consequently, learning) is just a result of this communication act between human beings. Most of these communication and interaction capabilities are deferred or 'fuzzy' (due to time or space barriers), the most risks of failure for the whole intervention we will obtain for e-learning as well as for any other learning plan modality.

Until we are not able to design *really* adaptive and intelligent environments, if such a thing ever occurs, human factor is the only element capable to quickly and automatically fit to the multiplicity of variables that should be modified in every single learning context. Human factor is therefore the best possible to fit the rest of the instruments at its disposal to a concrete learning model, goals, tools, contents and students, in a context where all these elements interact reciprocally. This is why it is the most important issue to ensure the quality for the whole e-learning initiative; anyway, his role must be clearly distinguished from the teachers' role in traditional learning contexts (in classroom or distance learning) (Barajas, Scheuermann and Kikis-Papadakis, 2003; European Teacher Foundation, 2005).

However, learning model in e-learning is equivalent to distance learning one? Even more, is e-learning itself a kind of distance learning? If we consider distance learning as 'without presence' learning, e-learning is not at all distance learning. In network training experiences, the *presence*, although it is deferred in time and place, is clearly shown and leaves certain tracks, usually more than the presence shown from students on in-classroom contexts. Since distance learning model is based upon 'non-presence', it is inappropriate for us right now. In conclusion, the basis of our quality methodology must be supported by the permanent presence of the online tutor.

Tutoring is the most important academic profession in e-learning; in fact, tutor is the real *teaching* staff, an important part of a course success relays on their work and excellent training. In fact, tutor's presence is permanent in the whole process from course design to knowledge monitoring and the evaluation of obtained skills, as well as to the evaluation of the whole learning activity. To define it in a few words:

> "Online tutor is the teaching role who follows a group of students on a part of their learning path, ensures the efficiency of teaching-to-learning process, promotes the achievement of aims and skills predicted for the academic initiative that he/she leads, by creating a context of collaborative and active learning, and evaluates how pre-established aims were achieved for students and for the academic intervention (quality management)" (Seoane Pardo and Zangrando, 2006).

The development of a quality model based upon the significance of human factor and online tutoring methodology, obviously without discrediting the rest of the elements involved, will allow us to take a step in our e-learning generation model to the so-called second advanced generation. The 'third generation' will probably be characterised by incorporating adaptive and intelligent environments to facilitate learning and to help tutors with their work.

4   Tutoring modalities

One of the most common difficulties for designers of e-learning experiences based upon online tutoring consist on determining what must the tutor do exactly, that is to say, what kind of activity must be monitored by tutors. Following a student activity along his/her learning path is rather different from monitoring the achievement of certain skills and competences by means of a learning unit, or even different from detecting learning difficulties that may arise to a single student or a group. All these different skills, however, are part of the online tutor's job.

Tutoring activity may be addressed to certain students along their learning path, to the acquisition of fixed contents, skills and competences by a group of students or even to solve specific problems in teaching-to-learning processes. Depending on what should we monitor (people, knowledge or learning difficulties), we will play different tutoring *roles* and, as a consequence, there are different tutoring modalities. A single tutor should play these three dimensions of tutoring activity or, when necessary, these roles could be held by specialised professionals. It will mostly depend on the dimension of training activities, the specialisation of learning contents and the homogeneity or heterogeneity of recipients.

4.1   Academic tutoring: tutor as knowledge manager (Tutor)

One of the most commonly identified needs when we plan a didactical experience with tutoring support is to count on the tutors' ability to monitor the acquisition of the specific learning contents from a certain activity. From these three tutoring roles, academic tutoring is the most similar to the 'classic' teaching activity. In fact, *Tutor* is responsible to make students achieve the goals planned for his/her learning unit. In addition, the academic tutor should lead the unit evaluation process.

Tutor is not (at least not necessary) the author of learning contents from the subject he/she leads. He must possess, however, expertise and knowledge on the field. Tutor's aim is not the exposition of learning contents; these appear at the beginning of the unit as 'data' and were supplied by other experts, probably without teaching but only scientific roles. His work starts by fitting contents to the didactical plan and the learning context (timing, composition of groups, relation to other contents, theoretical or practical approach of the issue, etc.). Then, the tutor will apply and even design the appropriate

strategies to achieve the desired goals. Finally, he/she will programme and monitor the activity until it is complete and assessed. In a few words, the tutor is not responsible for the field he/she monitors, but for the resulting learning.

Since there is no 'teaching time' for e-learning activities in general (or it is notably decreased in comparison with in-person contexts), the time a student usually needs to attend lessons in a traditional classroom is now substituted by a so-called learning time, where the student must increase the efforts to obtain the planned goals. Therefore, in a quality network learning model, both teaching and learning roles usually work harder than in traditional contexts. Academic tutoring implies autonomous learning, demands more from students and changes teacher into a tutor, that is, somebody who solves doubts, suggests challenges, stimulates, invites to collaborative working experiences, academically guides for problem-solving, follows the personal learning style of every single member inside the group. Tutor's work consists on promoting an autonomous and (inter)active learning to make the group achieve the expectations in terms of competences, skills and knowledge (Hudson, 2005; Mabrito, 2005).

4.2 Psycho-pedagogical tutoring: tutor as solver of learning difficulties (Counsellor)

Teaching implies not only scientific but also (and mainly) didactical competence; it is not enough *to know* but also *to know how to teach*. Both the dimensions of teaching role (scientific and didactic) are equally important.

In every learning experience, many problems that need specific psycho-pedagogic intervention should appear, as well as problems could arise, which exceed tutor's knowledge on the field. In this case, we will call the presence of the learning contents' designer; if we experience psycho-pedagogical problems, however, it is fundamental to count on a *counsellor*, whose purpose is to plan, along with scientific department and tutors' team, the appropriate didactical strategies and to take part when some learning difficulties should arise.

E-Learning experiences, even when applied to adults (as on lifelong learning contexts) are not free from learning difficulties. Some contents or skills require particular learning strategies, especially when they are difficult to develop in online environments. On the other hand, the flexibility inherent to this learning modality demands permanent didactical modifications, either by adapting to changing circumstances (and consequently not considered initially) within the group or by helping students to make the training compatible with their labour situation and family life.

So the counsellor provides initial advising for designing general didactical strategies, and takes part when his/her intervention is required to solve eventual problems affecting either of the actors implied in the learning process. Counsellor intervenes before specific difficulties from a single student when required either by a tutor, the student himself/herself or his/her mentor; he/she will also act as a consultant to resolve didactical problems with certain groups or contents, in order to improve learning experience; finally, he/she will watch for quality on the whole process, by actively participating in the evaluation of the entire learning activity and contributing with improvement proposals.

4.3   Personal tutoring: tutor as guide for students' learning path (Mentor)

Tutoring activity par excellence consists on following a student along his/her training in order to assist him and contributing to enjoy a learning experience as profitable as possible. As tutors, we can monitor learning as soon as problems arise along the process, but tutoring consists above all on helping the persons themselves. Since different contents demand counting on different professionals to manage them, and considering the fact that learning problems should be occasional, we need a figure whose purpose is to permanently accompany every single student, to help him take decisions and to serve as a reference when it is necessary to channel a problem related with the learning context.

Mentor's role is especially relevant when the student stay for a long time within an institution. Mentor provides advice and guides student training by analysing which contents will be more appropriated to his/her curriculum, interests and expectations. This role is commonly present in Anglo-Saxon higher education systems, especially in the most elitist institutions.

However, the term and the role 'mentor' possess ancient origins. *Méntor* is Telemachu's preceptor, the old man to whom Odysseus entrusted his son's training while the hero went to fight the Trojan War. This mythical figure, brought to our present times, refers to tracking of a single student (monitoring) for helping him/her achieve the specific goals planned for the learning activity. The mentor is a counsellor, guide, who follows the tracks and illuminate the student's road by providing him/her confidence (Carruthers, 1993; Anderson and Shannon, 1995); the absence of confidence is one of the most important causes of failure, and preventing it is the precise main purpose of a mentor.

5   Online tutor skills and competences: tutoring methodology

Regardless of whether tutoring relays on a single professional with different roles or, on the contrary, on specific professionals with single roles, the fact is that the correct definition of online tutor professional profile is crucial for succeeding in training initiatives.

Any tutoring role (tutor, counsellor or mentor) has to own a suit of skills and competences that will be extremely relevant for doing his/her job (Khan, 2001; Marcelo et al., 2002). These skills and competences will be strongly encouraged along his/her training period. One of the most common mistakes regarding e-learning initiatives with tutoring roles consist on selecting tutors with *only* one (of just a few) of the following skills, when it is fundamental to count on the tutors' ability to develop all of them.

Online tutoring methodology will depend on the context, the subject or the type of learning intervention where each tutor is going to take part; however, every one of them have to develop a suit of abilities without which it would be impossible to make an excellent job. The most important of these abilities will be briefly explained in the following sections.

5.1   Scientific competences

Online tutor, obviously when acting as a knowledge manager, will show enough competence with the subject under his/her responsibility. It is not necessary to count on the most relevant scientific expertise on the subject to ensure an excellent tutoring work,

we will never trust somebody strange to the field of knowledge with the unit monitoring. It is also important to maintain the experts near the didactical activity when possible because they could resolve the doubts exceeding the tutor's competence, but it is an error to consider that the most relevant expert is *ever* the better tutor, as not ever the better scientist is the better teacher. To know and to teach are very different competences and they are not always present on the same people. When a balance between these two abilities is not possible, it maybe preferable to renounce some of the scientific excellence to strengthen didactical skills.

5.2 Technological skills

Natural environment for tutors is technology, and it is important that they will be able to manage it with natural agility. It does not mean that every tutor should be a computer engineer, but the tools at his disposal must be familiar to him/her as to take the most of them to the didactical purpose. It is also relevant to explain that the tutor is not ever responsible to translate scientific contents into e-learning learning objects (in fact, this should be a different e-learning role), but network knowledge management implies the ability with these concepts, at least theoretically. In a few words, the tutor's teaching ever takes place on a computer classroom.

5.3 Methodological, didactical and psycho-pedagogical skills

Tutoring is a real teaching role; in fact, online tutor is *the* teacher in e-learning courses. It is common to identify, at least in European higher education institutions, scientific and teaching roles in one single professional, but it is very difficult to maintain this identification in e-learning.

Online tutor, as responsible of learning management, should possess didactical competences enough as to ensure the acquisition of the pre-established goals for the unit he/she is in charge of. His/her work does not consist on carrying out didactical strategies only (usually coordinated by a central didactical team), but on selecting which of them fit better to his/her own *style*, learning subject, students' group or type of course; moreover, the tutor should be ready to re-define learning strategies *in itinerary* if those initially taken do not come with the expected results.

5.4 Communication skills

Because tutor is in fact a teacher, he/she develops a communicative labour. There are several communicative dimensions in e-learning contexts, and now we could not analyse all of them properly. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise the complexity of communication schemes. Unlike in oral contexts, there is neither synchrony, oral context, intonation nor non-verbal communication in e-learning situations, so the whole interaction is almost reduced to written messages. This is why language care, precision and context adaptation, along with the ability to produce the desired effects in the receptor (reader, here), is fundamental. If we assume that communication is an art, it is particularly a relevant art in online training. Actually, to be an excellent communicator is one of the most wanted ability to become an online tutor, because the most of the learning difficulties (particularly with adult individuals), and consequently the failure, could be fixed with an effective communication experience.

5.5   *Social skills and leadership*

Although it should seem paradoxical, tutoring function is not that of exerting authority but leading a group. Ancient Romans distinguished clearly the terms 'auctoritas' and 'potestas': the one who has 'potestas' receive power and is considered a chief, but the one who possesses 'auctoritas' is recognised by the others as a model and becomes a leader.

Since the most effective e-learning methodology is probably the use of a collaborative learning model, the tutor should gain a leadership position consisting on promoting collaborative working inside a learning community, where he/she is also a member of a group dynamic (European Commission, 2005). These abilities, both psychological and communicative, are crucial to gain a powerful group dynamic, by achieving an appropriate interaction model that improves learning experience. Unlike in-classroom contexts (where obtaining leadership is not automatic, but it must be gained), teacher or tutor in e-learning experiences does not have a platform to exert his/her 'authority'. Moreover, considering that we are experiencing learning with adults, leadership must be gained because we are teaching 'equals', and there is not a pre-supposed distance where respect (due to age difference) becomes leadership automatically.

5.6   *Evaluation and quality skills*

Tutor should be responsible from evaluation (as an integral process), because his role is close to every stage and every actor in the e-learning scenario, from fitting scientific contents to didactical online contexts and the assessment of the effective acquisition of skills and competences by every single student to the feeling of success or failure of the whole learning process. If so, it is fundamental to trust the tutor with evaluation responsibility and train him/her to assume this competence. It is a complex process where many factors are implied, and it is not ever simple to judge or assess them from an objective or quantitative perspective.

To sum up, tutoring is the cornerstone for determining quality in e-learning initiatives. Although quality should be checked in every single stage of this process (from technology to services, and from learning contents to tutoring itself), the most determinant quality issue is the importance of human factor, whose core is precisely held by the online tutor. The tutor should be aware of every single element he/she is interacting to obtain the most of them, beginning with his/her own task, in order to set up the highest exigencies of quality for the learning activity.

6   Special features of tutoring in lifelong learning contexts

Lifelong learning is probably where e-learning finds the ideal context for its application. Here it is possible to take most of the e-learning capabilities because lifelong learning students fulfil the requirements to ensure a satisfactory learning experience. However, there are certain special features and inconveniences to be overcome.

It is quite clear that online training, understood not as a support for in-classroom instruction but as a full network experience, fits better with an adult learning profile. De-motivation and absence of maturity are two of the most important inconveniences in order to apply e-learning methods to learning activities, and this is why adults are the

natural addressees although this does not mean that adult student is motivated 'as default', of course.

On the other hand, flexibility inherent to e-learning (with regard to time and space) is the main ally of lifelong learning, because otherwise it would be very difficult to make compatible productivity and working day, mobility and workers' personal life with their necessity for training with other learning modalities.

Nevertheless, there are several lifelong learning specific features, or rather, lifelong learning user's specific features, before which the tutor will develop his/her mission in a particular way.

- Although we assume that adult learner is self-motivated because he/she is aware of training relevance, this does not mean that it is unnecessary contributing to increase motivation. The stress in work and living rhythm turn any inconvenience during training stage into an excuse for giving up, and hence the significance of the tutor's support and his/her permanent effort to permanently motivate every student.

- Flexibility is particularly relevant in this learning modality. Tutor must be able to fit strategies for achieving the goals to the students' specificities and learning styles, adapting them during the course when need.

- Paradoxically, relaxing learning rhythms cause more de-motivation than intensive work. Tutor should maintain an intensive working plan demanding from students their permanent attention, in order to prevent student discontinuity and, as a consequence, his/her subsequent desertion.

- Theory, that is to say, the acquisition of concepts, possesses less significance than achieving skills and competences: 'learning to do' instead of 'simply learning'. Frequently, lifelong-learning student possesses theoretical knowledge and needs a practical training, or the student himself/herself fixes the shortage of theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, theoretical training is less stimulating than obtaining competences and skills that let students to do something. So, the tutor will insist on an active, practical and functional learning. When theory is necessary, this should be studied with reflective and not passive methods.

- Students' heterogeneity is not a problem but a valuable feature. Strengthening group dynamics will increase the sense of membership, and this will indirectly contribute to improve results in a collaborative learning community. In fact, lifelong learning user values the opportunity to share experiences with other professionals, and frequently is interested on a personal enrichment as so as on practical questions.

7 Lifelong learning and excellent training

Thanks to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), e-learning is probably going to play a significant role as the most effective tool in order to ensure the achievement of many of its main objectives, as tutoring functions, for example. Furthermore, one of the UE strategic policy areas for 2007–2013 will be the development, regulation and integration into a common space for lifelong learning. Actually, European Union announced a 'New generation of programmes' consisting on a suit of interventions for the Sectorial Programmes (Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci y Grundtvig) focused

on permanent learning, with a total amount of 13.720 million euros. This demonstrates how lifelong learning is at its very peak.

The application of e-learning to lifelong learning contexts is favouring the development of this learning modality, whose growth is non-stoppable due to a changing and dynamic labour market.

Lifelong learning has been traditionally relegated, however, just like distance learning. Both have, at their disposal, the opportunity to claim their significance and to achieve the desired quality standards.

To do so, it is essential to seek for quality in lifelong learning initiatives, especially in those given online. The relevance of tutoring in these courses, particularly in permanent training experiences, will be the cornerstone to ensure quality.

Paradoxically, this context characterised by an adult and autonomous learning style possesses even more importance to monitor the teaching-to-learning process than doing so with other learning instances. Consequently, quality in lifelong e-learning experiences depends mostly on tutoring presence and monitoring the whole process.

8   Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show the significance of tutoring as a strategic quality issue for developing e-learning initiatives. Actually, after the first network-evolving stages where the development of technological tools and digital contents were the first priority, it now seems commonly accepted that it is very difficult to count on excellent online courses without an adequate tutoring presence.

Online tutor fulfils a highly qualified work whose competences are so large, complex and multidisciplinary as to necessitate specific training and appropriate qualification. Although this need is accepted and adequate professionals are demanded, there are not much initiatives focused to the qualification of tutors in order to ensure success for online training courses.

The University of Salamanca carries out, since 2004, a lifelong learning course, completely online ('Tecnologías y métodos de formación en red: *Tutor online*'), for training professionals coming from different fields, from academic to business sector, who desire to become online tutors. In the first five editions more than 100 professionals have been qualified, and their training tested also the methodology, skills and competences explained in this paper.

According to the results gained up to now, as well as the students tracking before their qualification, it is possible to state that the skills and competences acquired for these students are appropriate, because they have been able to efficiently serve as tutors in different learning initiatives. In addition, due to the high qualification obtained for many students, several of these tutors occupied important jobs in their companies as Human Resources Managers. In the next future a report of the initiatives developed by our ex-students will be published, along with the studies concerning job opportunities in the labour market for University of Salamanca 'Tutor online' students.

Nevertheless, we did yet publish some reports regarding the objectives, methodology, training programme and course evolution along its first editions. We have published several preliminary studies concerning the interaction model and the course learning dynamic, how the different skills and competences are gained and which contexts are appropriate to develop the different tutoring modalities.

This first analysis let us to state that 'Tutor online' is a highly flexible and dynamic diploma, as so as flexible and dynamic is the own tutoring work. Since we work only with reduced and heterogeneous groups, every new edition evolves to fit itself to students' necessities (by means of an evaluation of incoming competences) and to the new methodological proposals from our researching group scientific and didactical departments.

Finally, 'Tutor online' is based upon the creation of learning communities and the encouragement of collaborative working. The working core of this conception is the use of the forum as the main tool, where it is possible to practice tutor's abilities and build social knowledge. Besides, the forum is the real meeting point for every collaboration activity, as in any other communication tool (Bosom Nieto et al., 2006).

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