Online tutoring & *mentoring*. Definition, roles, skills and case studies

Abstract

This paper is devoted to define tutoring in eLearning initiatives and to consider all the elements related to tutor's activities and training. We will detail which are the skills that every tutor will have to own, and how these skills have to be present in his training; then, we will develop the roles that tutors usually play; finally, we will relate a case study given periodically at the University of Salamanca (Spain) in the form of an eLearning Lifelong learning course.

1. Introduction. From Mythos to (online) Tutor

Man is the only animal that learns for the whole life. Therefore, learning is one of the most important activities of human beings. Information and Communication Technologies, and specifically the Internet, brought to us new ways to communicate, share information and learn. Elearning has become a modality whose capabilities, advantages and potentials is indisputable, but many of the difficulties inherent to learning activities, far from being sorted out by this new modality, have been increased. Loneliness and demotivation of eLearning users is probably the first cause of failure of online courses.

To avoid this situation, eLearning initiatives must count on an effective human presence. This noted role, held by the professional called online tutor or mentor, find its origins and function many centuries ago, as will be shown.

It is almost impossible to find a field of knowledge or even science whose main concepts or topics were not related to Ancient Culture and, frequently, to Classical Mythology. In the next few lines we will try to develop a definition about online tutoring, coming from its mythological and etymological origins related to *Mentor* and the Latin term "monitor" derived from this Greek character.

According to Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus left Ithaca and was away fighting Trojan War, his son Telemachus was just an infant. So Odysseus entrusted Mentor with the care of Telemachus and the entire royal household until he will be back, 20 years later. Although Mentor is not a main character on Homer's epic poem, he represents wisdom, trust, counsel, teaching, protection, challenge, encourage... (Anderson and Shannon, 1995, p. 25, Carruthers, 1993, p. 9). Mentor's authority was so important to Telemachus than even the goddess Athena take the figure of Mentor to persuade hero's son to search for his father.

The role of Mentor instructing Telemachus is not quite clear on Homer's poem, and this is one of the most interesting questions about the matter. Never mind if Mentor (or Athena) is the real "teacher" of Odysseus' son. It is strange that Mentor is mentioned just a few times on the *Odyssey* and we do not

know how he "really" instructed Telemachus. The only important thing is that Telemachus achieves maturity enough to know how to face Penelope's suitors and help his father to complete the final revenge: he became a man with the help of an old person whose mission was to remain in the dark, "tutoring" Telemachus' steps, not helping him but following his tracks on a certain distance, because no one can drive the fate of a man except himself. In fact, the undefined, secondary but crucial role of Mentor did not change so much with regard to the excellent "Mentors" of eLearning students from nowadays.

Etymologically, "*mentor*" produces "monitor" in Latin. The verb "*maneo*" (to show, to indicate) come from the Indoeuropean *man* (to think, to know). So Homer's character Mentor is an anthropomorphisation of this idea: wisdom (Little, 1990, p. 298), thought, knowledge (and consequently know-how), personified by an old man whose purpose is to transmit this skills.

In the next sections, we will analyze which are the main causes of failure in eLearning initiatives; then, we will try to define the role of the online tutor, his competences and training, as an element of excellence in eLearning courses; finally, we will show a case study based on a Lifelong learning Diploma for training online Tutors at the University of Salamanca, among with a brief conclusion for this pages.

2. *Failure and eLearning: the absence of human factor*

Several years have passed from the first experiences with eLearning solutions applied to education and instruction. However, it seems that eLearning tools and methods do not take off as quality and excellence ways to complement in classroom training nor quality "distance learning" experiences. This problem is not only applicable to European context, where eLearning history is too short as to break the natural resistance against every novelty, but also to American institutions. Let us illustrate this affirmation with two recent studies regarding eLearning problems.

The General Study of the Internet released in Spain in 2005 (http://www.egi.es) shows that 26,4% of Internet users in Spain took at least one online course, but only 56,5% of them declared to be "satisfied" with the training received (Estudio general de Internet, 2005). But not only users are unsatisfied. According to a recent survey, carried out in the U.S. among 109 university and college administrators asked for a candidate to obtain a faculty position (Adams and DeFleur, 2005), 85% of the responders indicated that they had reservations with doctoral degrees earned online. In fact, they had to select a candidate from three applicants whose doctoral degree was obtained in a traditional way and a traditional institution (A), in a traditional institution but with 50% of degree work online (B), or in a "virtual university" and 100% online (C). Results were very clear: 98% chose the candidate with the traditional degree (A).

Therefore, Internet users and university administrators declare altogether that online training do not possess the desired quality to be considered as a good way to obtain qualifications and skills. But which is the opinion of corporations about online training?

According to a study carried out in Spain by Millward Brown for Santillana Formación (Millward Brown, 2006) in order to identify the role of eLearning in corporation training programs and the future training necessities, among other objectives, corporations and public administrations agree with the importance of online training and declare themselves ready to invest in eLearning to train their employees, mainly in blended eLearning solutions. The "ideal" online course for corporations, according to this study, has to own these characteristics: *pedagogically shocking* (appropriate contents, creativity, interactivity, innovative design); *technologically appropriate* (both course and environment are suited to student and corporation technical environment); *acknowledged and rewarded* (the student must be motivated by his company and will be rewarded if successfully finishes the course); *reinforced with in classroom sessions*; *dynamized and monitorized* (tutor's role is much appreciated).

Bringing discussion our context, and before defining what is exactly an online tutor and which role will play in an eLearning activity, it is important to consider what is (or rather, what is not) exactly eLearning. It is quite common to associate adjectives like "virtual" or "distance" to "learning", in order to build synonyms for "eLearning". But it is important to clarify that we are *not* thinking about virtual learning *nor* distance learning when we refer to eLeaning, at least not necessary.

When we try to develop a quality eLearning initiative, the receiving skills and knowledge are easier to demonstrate than in a traditional or in classroom learning context. So if we consider "virtual" as the opposite term of "real", eLearning is just *real* and not *virtual* learning.

But, from a philosophical point of view, *virtual* is "all that can induce an effect". If we consider eLearning as something different from many other forms of "learning" because of its active approach, it is clearly "virtual"; that is to say, it has the virtuality to "create" and not only to "assume" knowledge and skills.

With regard to distance learning, it is a common mistake considering eLearning as a form of distance learning, and applying its methods and categories to eLearning the results will be really poor. This is because eLearning is not *non-in classroom* like distance learning is. The actors in this process are present, on a different time and a different place, but their presence is verifiable, and leaves certain tracks. So eLearning is more than distance learning, and this is because of the human presence behind the technology, the net and the computers.

It is also common to hear about the extremely high academic failure in eLearning initiatives. In fact, when this occurs, it could be produced due to any of these four kinds of causes (Seoane, 2005):

a. Defective development of learning environment, learning contents and/or learning strategies.

b. Shortage of infrastructures, technological culture or logistics.

c. Courses do not fulfil the expectations of students.

d. Absence of human factor monitoring learning paths.

Let us detain for a while to analyze the causes derived from this absence of human factor in many eLearning initiatives. In fact, this is probably the most important element of failure and even deception feeling for students achieving on-line courses.

The core of this problem derives from a couple of wrong conceptions about real eLearning essence. This instructional modality has difficulties to find its own place between "classic" (in classroom) learning and "distance" learning. And, on the other hand, it seems that abbreviation "e" from "electronic" involves an opposition between "e"Learning and "h"Learning (i. e., "human" learning), assuming that in eLearning initiatives the goal is to substitute human presence for computer mediation.

One of the most important causes of failure is that, when an eLearning intervention is planned, its learning design often captures an instructional model derived from distance learning; therefore, we assume that eLearning is equivalent to distance learning, and this is completely false. Computer mediation and web interaction in this learning modality does not mean that we are in front of a classic distance learning model; this scenario can be held on a computer classroom with students (in a synchronous mode), with students that complete their conventional (in person) lessons with eLearning support (Rains & Scott, 2006), or on a "pure" context of on-line learning and, in this situation, we can find a context for a distance learning model or for a "native eLearning model".

The feel of loneliness expressed by most eLearning and distance learning students is identical; therefore, it seems that learning design for most eLearning initiatives is based on a distance learning model. Nevertheless, the expectations shown by students achieving eLearning courses are similar, in most cases, to those shown by students on a in person course.

Consequently, the choice of an efficient learning design, assuming that eLearning does not mean "distance" learning, is one of the keys to prevent from failure in eLearning courses.

The other problem is the wrong consideration of eLearning as a process where teaching, monitoring and evaluation can be substituted (or their presence must be drastically reduced) by computer interaction. In fact, if contents in eLearning courses are digitally provided and can be re-used, if we can design an evaluation plan with objective and automatic correction, and if we can solve problems with a FAQ's section or a forum to ask for minor questions, why not to reduce human intervention?

The answer is very simple: because learning is a human activity, and reducing human presence reduces learning results. It would be possible to fill several pages with psychological, pedagogical or even philosophical arguments to maintain this affirmation. Obviously, learning roles in eLearning must be different from those present on "classic" and distance learning, but the strong presence of teaching, eLearning-adapted roles, ensure the success of an eLearning course, as will be shown in the next paragraphs.

3. *Defining online tutoring. Competences and training required*

One of the most common arguments used to value online training is that eLearning initiatives, when they are quality learning courses, are built around and directly focused to single learners; even more, learning environment should be able to be automatically adapted to user necessities, and to different learning styles. This idea, if entrusted to "intelligent" systems, without a continuous human intervention, is just unattainable at the present time (Derry and LaJoie, 1993).

It is possible to develop adaptive systems capable to "learn" user's behaviours, and to "decide" which contents or activities are more urgent or important for a single student, given certain parameters. But an adaptive learning design, adjusted to specific users and, above all, an effective monitoring of the whole process (not only in order to evaluate quantitative criteria -percentage of contents "passed"-, but mainly to ensure that students achieve the skills and goals planned for the course) is only possible if held by specific learning roles.

On a conventional learning context, teachers usually spend most of their efforts to "send" contents to students, and so their labour consists basically on a transmission of knowledge. In fact, the semantic relation between actor and role in the learning process is quite clear in English: the teacher "teaches" and the learner "learns". But is there a teacher in eLearning processes?

In eLearning contexts, teacher's time and effort to transmit knowledge is commonly substituted by documents, learning objects or documentation where the whole information for the unit can be found. So teacher's presence in eLearning contexts is not ever necessary to guarantee that contents reach the students, and there is no need to reserve a time for it, but students play an active role by processing information and contents available *a priori*. And this scenario gives rise to the wrong model of eLearning "based upon the student", according to which students work absolutely in an autonomous way and, most of the times, with an absolute feeling of loneliness.

The absence of teacher in eLearning contexts (or its secondary presence) does not mean that there is not teaching roles, although these are decentered roles (Anagnostopoulos, Basmadjian, & McCrory, 2005). It is also false than computers could substitute teaching roles, because they are simply mindtools for critical thinking, if used efficiently (Jonassen, Carr, and Yueh, 1998). In fact, and just because eLearning make students play an active role, it is very important the monitoring of their work, by proposing activities, helping to solve any doubt or difficulty, evaluating the progresses shown by students, promoting collaborative work and learning by doing, to ensure the achievement of the specific goals defined for the initiative and/or pursued by single students. This basic role on eLearning activities, the real teaching role, is that carried out by the online tutor.

The aim of tutoring is to prevent this fatal feeling of loneliness present in many eLearning initiatives, and to motivate students to achieve the desired goals. Actually, the main difference between distance and eLearning is the presence of a human factor (tutor) that promotes interaction, communication and knowledge building among the members of a group. This kind of communication was never seen before in any learning activity: it is not one-to-one, one to all, but all-to-all communication, and this, if efficiently used by tutors, is the great advantage of eLearning among any other learning form.

Tutoring is the most important academic profession in eLearning; in fact, tutor is the real *teaching* staff. On its work and excellent training relays an important part of a course success. In fact, tutor's presence is permanent in the whole process from course design to knowledge monitoring and the

evaluation of obtained skills, as so as the evaluation of the whole learning activity. To define it in a few words:

Online tutor is the teaching staff that 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 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).

As shown in this definition, the work, roles and responsibilities assumed by online tutors are crucial to ensure the success of any web-based activity. This professional is the only one that takes part in every learning stage, and his work is affected by the whole elements of the learning activity. Therefore, counting on excellent tutors will give us the possibility to permanently improve learning contents, plans, learning designs, tools, activities, methods and strategies.

Tutor's role is complex and "multipurpose". In fact, develops several tasks that could be defined in different fields, whose main functions are not usually developed for teachers in conventional contexts. The three roles fulfilled by tutors in eLearning activities are the following:

- Academic (teacher): by helping learner to achieve knowledge and skills related to the field of study.

- Psycho-pedagogical (didactics): by fitting the course to the different learning styles of learners, and by giving solutions to didactical problems that would appear in every teaching-learning process.

- Personal (mentor, coach, counsellor): by focusing the learner to build its own learning path, trying to prevent as possible the academic failure that surely occurs when the selected learning path does not match with student's skills.

These roles could be held by the same tutors or distributed among a group of tutors with specific competences, depending on the complexity of the courses and structures. It is clear that the first role (Academic) is specific for every single knowledge area, and must be held by a person with scientific competences related to the matter he is monitoring. Concerning the other roles (Psycho-pedagogical and Personal), their activity is related to cross-competences, not to specific fields of knowledge, but their presence on every step in the learning activity is fundamental to adapt learning strategies to learning styles, solve problems and consolidate a solid but flexible didactical environment.

One of the most difficult questions about online tutoring is how to train excellent tutors. Given the specific nature of net-based learning, online tutor's training process will consist of getting a joint of skills that will be helpful in his teaching career; without theses competences, tutoring would be completely unsuccessful. In fact, it is not enough for tutor to know the field whose contents he will monitor and evaluate. The learning environment in eLearning is not a "natural" context but a technological space, and,

of course, written communication on a social context demands special skills related to these capabilities. This is a short list of competences and skills to be owned by tutors (Seoane Pardo and García Peñalvo, 2006, Khan, 2001):

a. Scientific competences. Especially for Academic tutors, it is indispensable to own knowledge enough to lead the whole process from solving doubts, proposing activities and make the appropriate evaluations.

b. Technological skills. Tutor's office and classroom is a computer and a sort of software solutions connected to the Internet. Therefore, he must efficiently know the learning environment and tools at his disposal.

c. Methodological, didactical and psycho-pedagogical skills (Marcelo, 2002). Online tutoring is a teaching role, and so his train must include many aspects related to knowledge and useful strategies to hold his job properly.

d. Communication skills. Assuming that any teaching work is a communication act, and particularly eLearning, because of the writing format of communication inherent to this learning form, communication is one of the most important skills that an excellent tutor has to own.

e. Social skills and leadership. ELearning methodology is based upon creating a community. In this context, tutor must be able to involve students and lead the group towards achievement of learning purposes.

f. Evaluation skills. One of the most important functions for tutors is to evaluate, not only competences achieved from students, but all the elements related to the learning activity: learning objects, strategies, activities, etc.

g. Quality skills. As an effect of the last skills, the online tutor is probably the better quality auditor of eLearning process. Although external quality auditory should be ever necessary, the best way to ensure a permanent quality level is to train tutors to evaluate quality on eLearning processes.

Competences expected from tutors are ambitious and multi-disciplinar, and it is really difficult to develop a learning strategy to train professionals for eLearning courses. In the next section, a case study regarding tutor on-line training will be shown.

4. *Case study: University of Salamanca and "Tutor online" Diploma*

One of the most commonly reported problems by evaluating eLearning courses, *i. e.* academic failure, could be solved by counting on a strong tutorial structure that supports the course. In fact, when this occurs, the academic success is clearly increased. The University of Salamanca carries out, since 2004, a Lifelong learning course, completely online, for training professionals coming from different fields, from academic to business sector, who desire to become online tutors. The completeness and thoroughness of its program, among with the extremely high satisfaction manifested by learners, the

professional excellence of its graduates, the low percentage of academic failure (12%), and the interest shown by institutions and big companies on the University of Salamanca teaching model, turn this course into a case of study that deserves to be analyzed.

"Tutor online" Diploma has trained up to 100 tutors in the first five editions. It is an online course that certificates 300 hours and 15 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), whose methodology is based upon simple principles:

- Small groups. The maximum number of students for a group is 15.
- Strong tutorial presence and high interaction. Every unit (3 weeks) has two specific Academic tutors. Every group has up to 11 tutors along the whole course (15 weeks). Regarding to interaction, every student produces 153,30 meaningful messages in forums per course, and up to more than 600 meaningful messages for more active students.
- Learning by doing. Activities are the basis of "Tutor online" Diploma. There are documentation, learning objects and other materials, but every skill is evaluated through practical activities and forum interaction.
- Academic, Psychopedagogical and Personal tutoring. Every student has a personal tutor and several academic tutors (two per unit). There is a Psychopedagogical team that, as well as elaborating learning design and didactical strategies, helps tutors and students if necessary to solve any didactical or learning difficulty.
- Collaborative working. Most of the activities proposed to student are group activities, and an important part of their evaluation consists on studying the process of building and collaborating to create the activities, that is to say, the interaction and effectiveness of task sharing.
- Social knowledge building. There are not many hierarchical structures. Tutors promote community building and social knowledge to train future tutors to discuss, moderate, achieve collective solutions to problems...
- Intensive learning program. The units and modules are studied in a sequential calendar, with several activities and informs per unit.
- Integral training, not specialized. Modular learning design architecture. The Diploma cover modules on general aspects regarding eLearning and online tutoring; eLearning environments (LMCS & LCMS) and other tools useful for online learning; communication, learning management and collaborative learning; managing communities of learning and practice; learning objects and technological standards for learning design and metadata; evaluation, quality management; eLearning application contexts; design of learning courses.
- Learning and tutoring from the first week. Students take part on tutoring activities from the second unit, in order to auto-evaluate their progress on tutoring roles. Every tutor is evaluated for the rest of students inside his group.

- Focused to both Academic and Company realities. The diploma receives students from firms, academic institutions and other corporations. Activities, projects, situations and materials are planned for both realities in order to train students for different eLearning contexts.
- Creation of a "real" final eLearning course. The Diploma ends with the presentation of a complete eLearning project, containing objectives, methodology, learning design, evaluation and budget.

"Tutor on-line" Diploma was initially planned as a Lifelong learning course focused to teachers interested on eLearning and applying eLearning strategies to their work. Unexpectedly, a growing interest came from companies and institutions (educational or not) demanding solutions suited to their requirements and necessities (Ruipérez, 2003).

"Tutor online" Diploma has become a reference on tutor training for eLearning courses in Spanish, and receive students not only from Spain and other European countries, but also from Latin America.

5. *Conclusion*

The world of learning experienced a real revolution with the globalisation of the Internet and the spreading of net-based learning tools. ELearning, however, did not come with the better results, and this is not (at least not completely) because of "technological" factors.

In fact, most of the responsibility of failure in eLearning initiatives is due to the absence of "teaching roles", in part due to its substitution for learning objects, in part because of a wrong conception of interaction, knowledge building and communication flows on an eLearning environment.

In spite of learning tools and advantages inherent to computer and net-based learning, learning activity (electronic or not) is a human and communicative act that requires monitoring, evaluation, motivation, etc.

There are many ways to measure quality on eLearning activities, but counting on the presence of an efficient staff of tutors on-line will ensure the presence and coherence of an actor in any part of the learning process.

This key figure, the online tutor, must own an outstanding role to ensure the achievement of goals, competences and skills planned for every course by students. Therefore, it is fundamental to develop a training method for tutors in order to alleviate eventual faults or negative conditions inherent to eLearning: loneliness, distance, and shortage of infrastructures or technological knowledge.

University of Salamanca, since 2004, is giving this Lifelong learning course whose purpose is to train online tutors for eLearning initiatives so in Academic contexts as in Companies, with remarkable success.

6. *References*

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Key Terms:

ELearning: net-based learning or web-based learning.

Online Tutor: teaching staff that 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 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).

Online Mentor: teaching staff that 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 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).

Training of trainers: process of learning (or eLearning) especially addressed to future trainers.

Quality management: management of the whole characteristics of an entity that grant the aptitude to satisfy explicit and implicit needs.

Skills: abilities.

Lifelong learning: Continuous learning, applied to professional skills or vocational competences.