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The e-Tutor Figure: Findings and conclusions of a case-study research project

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Abstract

This article describes the findings and conclusions drawn from a study analysing the role of the teacher/tutor in two e-learning experiences undertaken at two public institutions in Asturias, Spain, in the 2007/2008 academic year. The aim of the study was to explore the various ways of understanding the teacher/tutor figure from a different yet complementary perspective to that of other studies in which the figure's functions, roles and competencies have already been underscored. A case-study methodology was used for this research project. The cases were selected using intentional sampling. The analysis focused on three aspects: a) The conception of training design and implementation phases as either integrated or separate phases, and, consequently, the existence of one or more professionals; b) The students' assessment of the teacher/tutor's work, and; c) The teacher/tutors' and students' assessment of communication tool use and the content of interaction generated within the

virtual classroom. This triple analysis allowed us to conclude that there are several ways of conceiving and carrying out the function of an e-teacher/tutor ("narrow" or "broad"). Furthermore, the results of the study suggest that there is a need to perform a critical reading of the so-called advantages of the e-learning approach over the face-to-face approach. The conclusion drawn from the results of this study is that further research needs to be undertaken into the educational – and not only the technical – dilemmas of e-learning, which would involve taking greater account of the social, educational, organisational and political variables that have an impact on it.

Keywords

e-learning, tutoring, case study, virtual classroom, online courses

La figura del tutor de e-learning. Aportaciones de una investigación con estudios de caso

Resumen

Este artículo recoge las conclusiones de una investigación centrada en analizar el papel del docente-tutor en un par de experiencias de teleformación desarrolladas en dos instituciones públicas en Asturias (España) durante el curso 2007-2008. La finalidad del trabajo era explorar las diferentes formas de entender la figura de este profesional adoptando un punto de vista diferente pero complementario al de otras investigaciones que han subrayado sus funciones, roles o competencias. La metodología de investigación utilizada ha sido el estudio de casos. Se han seleccionado estos ejemplos mediante un muestreo intencional. El análisis se centra en tres aspectos: a) la concepción de las fases de diseño y desarrollo de la formación como fases integradas o separadas, y con ello, la existencia de uno o varios profesionales; b) la evaluación del alumnado sobre las tareas del docente-tutor, y c) la evaluación de los docentes-tutores y discentes sobre el uso de las herramientas de comunicación y el contenido de las interacciones generadas en el aula virtual. Este triple análisis nos ha permitido concluir que existen diferentes formas de concebir y ejercer la función docente-tutorial en la formación en línea («restringida» y «amplia»). Por otro lado, los resultados de esta investigación apuntan la necesidad de realizar una lectura crítica de las denominadas ventajas de la modalidad virtual frente a la formación presencial. A la luz de los resultados obtenidos en este trabajo se concluye que es necesario un desarrollo de la investigación en e-learning a partir de dilemas pedagógicos (y no exclusivamente técnicos), lo que supondrá tener más presentes las variables sociales, pedagógicas, organizativas y políticas que influyen en la educación virtual.

Palabras clave

e-learning, tutoría, estudios de caso, clases virtuales, cursos en línea

Introduction: The rise of e-learning and the need to analyse it from a teaching perspective

Today, e-learning processes (whether blended with face-to-face learning or not) play an important role in initial and lifelong learning, in both the public and private sectors (Global Estrategias, 2002). This is evidenced by the fact that, for example, the Spanish Embassy's Office for Economic and Commercial Affairs in Miami estimates that the market value of e-learning will reach $74 billion by 2013 (Corral, 2008). In the context of the European Union, there is already talk of "e-learning territories" (Dondi, 2007) to explain the spread of this training approach in a variety of social areas, such as work, vocational training and regulated education.

In Spain, back in 2004, Santillanaformación published a report on the demand and prospects of the e-learning market, in which big Spanish companies and public and private institutions took part. The cited report showed that 80% of the organisations studied had had some experience of Web-based training. In the university context, the report produced in 2008 by the Conference of Spanish University Rectors (CRUE) on the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the Spanish higher education system revealed that around 96% of the institutions had already implemented virtual teaching plans, and that 98% of them used learning management systems (LMSs) for that purpose.

These studies and research projects underscore just how important e-learning is becoming in a variety of different areas, a fact that should indeed make us think about considering it as an object of research. As such, it should be approached by carrying out studies on the curriculum and on teaching (Area, 2008; Rodríguez Malmierca, 2006; Fueyo & Lorenzo, 2006; Fueyo & Rodríguez-Hoyos, 2008; López Meneses, 2008).

Taking due account of these considerations, in this article we present the results of a case-study research project designed to analyse e-learning processes from a teaching perspective. Our aim is to analyse certain aspects of e-learning processes in order to reflect on the potential and limits of this educational approach. Specifically, we shall analyse the role of the teacher or tutor in two e-learning processes implemented in two public institutions in Asturias, Spain, in the 2007/2008 academic year. Based on the results obtained, we shall propose a discussion on these processes in order to reflect on e-learning from a more complex perspective, one that is capable of contemplating educational dilemmas and not just technical problems. Consequently, our study becomes part of the body of research into the role of the teacher (Badia, 2006) and of the e-moderator (Benito, 2009) in areas such as higher education. In any event, it is worth pointing out that very little research has so far been carried out in the field of e-tutoring in Spain (Cabero, 2010).

Description of Case Studies

The cases studied in this research project were two e-learning processes implemented in Asturias, Spain, in the 2007/2008 academic year. To keep the research data confidential, the training experiences are referred to as "case A" and "case B".

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Case A was implemented at an institution that organises training for all public administration workers in the autonomous community of Asturias. Regarding the design of the training offered, it was structured around six educational units: Audiovisual Language, Image, Sound, Television, Advertising and Stereotypes, which were taken one after the other.

Case B was implemented in a university postgraduate course, designed as a lifelong learning process, in the area of socio-educational intervention in formal and non-formal contexts. Regarding the structure of the training offered, it was divided into two educational units called "Parallel Curriculum and Audiovisual Literacy: Old and New Displays" and "New Technologies for Education in a Globalised World". The focus of these units was the study and use of new technologies as tools for socio-educational work.

The main characteristics of the case studies in this research project are shown in Table 1.

Methodology and Object of Study

The case-study research methodology used is clearly qualitative and places our research project among other studies that have obtained satisfactory results by the same methods for research into the field of e-learning (Rubia, Anguita & Ruíz, 2006; Márquez, Garrido & Moreno, 2006; Blázquez & Alonso, 2009; Herrera, 2009; Argüello, 2009).

It is a known fact that the general aim of case studies is to find out more about the realities studied in order to improve them, with each of them being understood as unique educational

Table 1. Characteristics of the case studies

	CASE A	**CASE B**
Organisation	- An institution that organises training for all public administration workers in the autonomous community of Asturias.	- Faculty of Education. University of Oviedo.
Theme	- Critical literacy.	- Socio-educational intervention, with technologies, in formal and non-formal contexts.
Training structure	- Six educational units: Audiovisual Language, Image, Sound, Television, Advertising and Stereotypes.	- Two educational units: Parallel Curriculum and Audiovisual Literacy: Old and New Displays, and New Technologies for Education in a Globalised World.
Activities	- Individual. - Compulsory and optional.	- Individual and group. - Compulsory.
Communication tools	- Asynchronous.	- Synchronous and asynchronous.
Assessment	- Of knowledge gained by students (through activities). - Of participating student satisfaction (a standard questionnaire and an ad hoc questionnaire).	- Of knowledge gained by students (through activities). - Of the educational process (ad hoc questionnaire and focus group).

entities and social entities (Stake, 1998). It is from this perspective that the cases were selected, using an intentional sampling technique (Ávila, 2006).

Data were gathered with the usual qualitative research tools: participant observation, field notes, institutional document analysis, interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. Data were analysed through a content analysis of all the discourses and texts generated, with the help of MAXQDA 2007 qualitative data analysis software.

The ultimate goal of the study was to understand the conception held of teacher/tutors in the e-learning processes of the two cases analysed, which considers two ways of carrying out their professional function (which we call "narrow" and "broad"). To that end, three distance learning variables were analysed; these variables are the ones that are generally investigated in this area:

1. The conception of training design and implementation phases as either integrated or separate phases, and, consequently, the existence of one or more professionals carrying out their work in each of these phases.
2. The students' assessment of the teacher/tutor's work.
3. The teacher/tutors' and students' assessment of communication tool use (discussion boards, chats, e-mail, etc.) and the content of interaction generated within the virtual classroom.

Results

In case A, we found that the people who planned the training were experts in a particular subject (depending on the course taught); additionally, another professional was required to carry out course tutoring. It was often found that subject experts were not usually trained in education in general or in e-learning in particular, which created problems when implementing the educational process. In keeping with the classification offered by Ardizzone and Rivoltella (2004), tutors are, above all, "relational tutors", given that their functions have basically been those of controlling, analysing and managing the communication dynamics that develop between students, and between students and tutors.

There is, therefore, a very clear difference between the training design phase and the training implementation phase, which limits a tutor's teaching role to that of a "technician who applies" things that have been designed externally. This is the reason why we have used the adjective "narrow" to describe his/her work. Some of the participants in this training process highlighted this issue as one of the main obstacles preventing the tutor from taking decisions to adapt the teaching-learning process while it was being implemented.

Secondly, the students' assessment of the tutoring was very positive; they were very satisfied with the tutor's teaching. Among the most important qualities of the tutor, they underscored the speed of replying to e-mails and discussion board posts, and the clarity and appropriateness of the replies. To a lesser extent, they also pointed out other qualities, such as motivation, debate activity planning, technical problem solving and additional documentation input.

Third and finally, regarding the use of communication tools, we should point out that, apart from one of the discussion boards, the tutor's intervention in every communication space was

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minimal. When the tutor participated, his/her comments were aimed at guiding student activity and encouraging students to take part.

Taking the way that the tutor related to students via the platform's internal messaging system as a point of reference, we should point out that while this tool fosters a rather more personal relationship with students, we are unable to conclude that the use made of it fostered a personalisation of teaching interaction, especially bearing in mind the high degree of standardisation of the messages sent by the tutor. In any event, when students were asked about this particular issue, a high percentage of them felt that a personalised response to their needs had been given throughout the whole process. This leads us to assert that messaging allows an apparently personalised type of interaction to be established, whereas the content analysis of the interactions established on discussion boards and internal messaging did not suggest that the tutor had established strategies to adapt the training to the individual characteristics or needs of each student.

In case B, regarding the conception of e-learning design and implementation phases, we found that the professionals themselves designed and implemented this training, thus the two mentioned phases are understood as being two sides of the same coin (and, consequently, the teaching profession is understood in the broadest of senses). This was assessed positively by participating teachers, given that they felt that having greater control over every component of the teaching-learning process was an advantage. As a result, the limits of the teaching function were expanded and the potential to motivate students in the educational process was enhanced.

In addition, teachers expressed the problems that they encountered when it came to running the training process, particularly with regard to the organisation of personal work (owing to the need to combine it with other activities). The same limitations were also pointed out by the students, who have greater independence to organise their study time on e-learning courses than on face-to-face courses.

Secondly, the students' assessment of the role of the teacher was mostly positive; above all, they pointed out the potential to interact at all times with the team of teachers via the platform's various means of communication, as well as the participatory nature of the activities that the teachers proposed. As in the previous case, one of the most positive aspects of the teaching that students underscored was the speed of replying to interventions made via the platform's communication tools. Also worthy of note is the fact that students felt that teachers had provided a personalised response to the questions and problems that they, the students, had posed or encountered throughout the teaching-learning process. This was reflected, above all, in the appropriateness of the tasks and the response given to their needs, as and when they arose. Finally, all the students stated that the e-learning approach represented a change in the way teachers taught. Among the changes highlighted, the most common ones were those connected with changes in the role of the teacher: from a beacon of knowledge to a guide and facilitator of students' reflections (in such a way that students are responsible for the construction of their own learning). Besides this change, they also pointed out the potential to teach without the need to share a physical space.

Finally, and referring to the use of communication tools, we could describe the level of teacher intervention in the discussion boards as low, if account is taken of the fact that it was the usual channel for communication exchanges between teachers and students in the training process. Almost all

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Table 2. Main results of the research project

	Case A	Case B
Design and implementation of the training process	- Separate phases. - Problems incorporating changes into the training process.	- Integrated phases.
Professionals involved in the design and implementation process	- Two professionals: expert and tutor. - "Narrow" profession.	- One professional that plans and implements. - "Broad" profession.
Role of the teacher/tutor	- Relational tutor. - Tutor as a "technician who applies".	- Teacher has greater control over every component of the training process. - Greater capacity to motivate students. - The job of teaching becomes more intense.
Students' assessment of the teacher/tutor	- Positive. - The most highly-valued qualities of the tutor: speed and clarity of replies. - The educational process was personalised.	- Positive. - They highlight the high degree of interaction. - Participatory nature of the activities. - The most highly-valued qualities of the teacher/tutor: speed of replies. - The educational process was personalised. - There was a change in the traditional role of the teacher.
Assessment of communication tool use	- Minimal tutor participation in these tools. - Purpose of tool use: guiding student activity and encouraging students to take part. - High degree of standardisation in the use and conception of some of these tools.	- Minimal tutor and student participation in these tools. - Purpose of tool use: public assessment of work produced.

of the teacher interventions were for carrying out a public assessment of the work produced by different groups of students.

In view of the results obtained, we are able to assert that the communication tools used facilitated the implementation of the various teaching strategies, both individual and collective. In this respect, teachers and students alike highlighted the fact that it would seem appropriate to undertake activities via chats in e-learning processes, and this is something that actually corroborates the findings of other studies (Tancredi, 2006; Cataldi & Cabero, 2006; Salmerón, Rodríguez & Gutiérrez, 2010). In particular, they underscored the potential of chats to make exchanging ideas simpler.

The main results of the research project are shown in Table 2.

Results Discussion: Conclusions

The first conclusion we are able to draw from this research project is that there is more than one way of understanding the teaching figure in e-learning processes. For example, the teaching function in

case A was more akin to the function of a tutor than a teacher. In the training experiences analysed, the e-tutor only intervened in the implementation phase – and not in the design phase – of e-learning processes. Here we found that this professional was conceived as someone who applies things designed externally, and not as someone who takes part in decisions on the design of the various components of the curriculum: activities, assessment, content, etc. The tutor's educational role is "reactive" in nature, since it is characterised by the fact of waiting for interventions or questions from students and subsequently replying to them, without – as a general rule – putting forward any educational proposals other than those already designed. In short, we found a teaching figure that was more akin to a "training manager" (Colás, 2003).

Even though an e-tutor unquestionably has functions that differ from those of a teacher in a face-to-face process (Blázquez & Alonso, 2004; Marcelo, 2006; Aragon & Jonson, 2002), both of them can carry out their work in line with the same educational rationality that, in studies on face-to-face teaching, is generally described as "technical". Consequently, processes of teaching de-professionalisation may occur, owing to the fact that the teacher/tutor is considered to be a figure that does not take important decisions on the training process (Rozada, 2003).

In case B, we found a different way of understanding the teaching figure. Unlike in case A, teachers in case B have full autonomy to take decisions in the e-learning design and implementation phases. Their work begins in the preactive phase of teaching, and they are in charge of shaping every component of the curriculum used in e-learning processes. This projects a less structured, more flexible conception of training, since the teachers are not only autonomous, but also responsible for reorientating the processes while they are being implemented, depending on the results obtained and the problems encountered. Indeed, flexibility is a trait that some authors have highlighted as being one of the main characteristics of this approach (Marcelo, 2002; Ruipérez, 2003). For the cited authors, this flexibility means that a teacher is able to manage and implement a training process anywhere, anytime (so long as there is access to the Internet). However, we believe that this flexibility should be understood as a chance to re-adapt teaching to the constantly changing circumstances of educational processes. This would allow teacher/tutors to reflect on and research into their own teaching, thus bringing them closer to so-called socio-critical and practical rationality.

Another conclusion drawn from this research project is that e-learning, in itself, does not facilitate the personalisation of teaching in any educational process, which contrasts with some hypotheses proffered by various authors (Horton, 2000; Silva, 2004; Vásquez, 2007), who actually point to this feature as being something central to this training approach. If we consider that the personalisation of training entails starting with flexible educational designs and establishing mechanisms that allow teachers to ascertain the students' prior knowledge, pace and learning methods, then it would seem that a large majority of e-learning experiences do not match up (Rodríguez-Hoyos, 2009). Our research has allowed us to conclude that, in the two cases analysed, the teachers offered standardised training to the whole group, while ignoring the students' prior knowledge and their different paces of learning. Thus, establishing personalised interaction using the communication tools (discussion boards, e-mail, etc.) available on the e-learning platforms, or answering a question or solving a technical problem through them, does not necessarily imply an adaptation of the objectives pursued to the

individual characteristics of each student. Furthermore, these findings contrast with the students' own assessment of the training process, since, in both cases, they pointed out that the educational process had been personalised.

In this study, two ways of conceiving the job of the e-tutor were found (narrow and broad), thus giving us an insight into different educational rationalities where teachers are conceived as having varying degrees of autonomy and freedom when it comes to taking decisions on the curriculum. Secondly, it is precisely this conception of the teaching profession, which portrays two ways of understanding an e-tutor's duties, that prepares these professionals differently to face up to the challenges of e-learning processes, such as the difficulty involved in personalising training processes and the ineffective use of communication tools. Thirdly, as we have shown in this study, it is necessary to revise some of the educational discourses suggesting that e-learning processes allow training processes to be better personalised and more flexible, that they facilitate communication processes between participants, or that the duties of the e-tutor are very different from those of a face-to-face teacher. In short, it is a question of undertaking more research to show what social, educational and political factors have an impact on e-learning and how they raise or limit its potential.

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