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Tutor as an important e-learning support

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Abstract

Teachers are all the time looking for different ways of increasing the quality of their teaching. At present the use of computers and new technologies has become an important aspect of education. They have enabled the teaching community to redefine some of the strategies and concepts of teaching and learning. In this climate computer-based distance learning courses have emerged. One of the supports of the distance learning is e-learning, which is widely used at the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. The article attempts to examine how the traditional role of a teacher in the e-courses changes and what preconditions are pivotal for the tutoring of such courses. In addition to that, it describes a creation of e-learning courses from the pedagogical point of view. Finally, a few problems of practical e-tutoring run at a university level in the Czech Republic are depicted.

Keywords: ICT; e-learning; didactics; change; tutoring; students

1. Background

Along with the ever changing needs and aims of our students and an immense growth of information and communication technologies (ICT), syllabus design, material development, and approaches have changed. And so has the role of teacher. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to explore a new challenging position of a teacher and thoroughly examine and consequently streamline his/ her present roles in the educational process. In addition to that, a few problems of practical e-tutoring run at a university level in the Czech Republic are depicted.

2. E-learning at the Faculty of Informatics and Management

E-learning courses (using multimedia technology to deliver tuition) have become an indispensable part of acquiring new knowledge, particularly at tertiary level. Almost all the universities in the Czech Republic now offer them, both for their own students, and also for the general public – such courses are attractive to universities as they can be an additional source of income.

The Faculty of Informatics and Management at the University of Hradec Kralove has been intensely involved in the application of e-learning since 1997 [1], as the teachers see this as a way of improving the quality of their

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teaching. They also find it contributes enormously towards increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational process, and it enhances learner autonomy. The e-courses are created in a virtual learning environment (Learning Management System) called WebCT (Web Communication Tools). As Mackay and Stockport [2] believe, there are several advantages of using the virtual learning environment: minimizing travelling to attend classes; students absorb the material in smaller portions; and the information is easy to update and leasing is possible 247 hours a week. On the other hand, there are some drawbacks [3] which might contradict with the above mentioned statements. The e-learning courses are certainly time-consuming and demanding for creation, preparation and evaluation. Furthermore, both students and teachers sometimes might have limited knowledge in the use of technology. At random there might also occur problems with technology. And finally, students' study skills are not developed enough (for instance, in the course of *Business English* their level of L2 is not sufficient to do the assignment in the online course).

At present, more than 170 e-courses are offered, with more than 45 of these being foreign language courses. Some of them, such as *Written Business English*, can be taught completely online. Each part of an online course starts with self-study information input and concludes with tasks, quizzes or assignments. Self-study is very important for our students. As Badger [4] has pointed out, the time available for learners to spend on improving their language skills will always be limited. For many learners, there will never be enough time or money available to attend regular language classes, but all learners can find the time and money for self-study. There are several key factors which influence successful self-study:

- *learner motivation* – Motivating factors can include job satisfaction, enhanced job performance, financial rewards, possible promotion, and success in tests and examinations.
- *time* – It is necessary to create a level of interest in self-study that can compete with the other activities in the learners' lives.
- *learner support* – A close link between self-study and classroom-based tasks, regular contact with a tutor, contact with fellow students and access to a language support website are all important.
- *affordability* – The comparatively low cost of self-study is attractive to employers.
- *study materials* – Materials must be highly accessible and easy to use.

Usually, there are only three face-to-face tutorials: an *introductory tutorial*, where the students meet their tutor who will guide and support them through the whole course, a *mid-course tutorial*, where the students usually discuss with their tutor any problems they have come across when doing their assignments, and the *final tutorial*, where the students' work is evaluated orally by the tutor. This is particularly suitable for distance students and those doing their main courses at other universities. Some students attend regular classes and use the e-courses for revision, going over the information taught in class again and doing additional practice exercises. Finally, there are 'blended' courses which combine online and face-to-face teaching. Conventional face-to-face teaching is sometimes necessary for the development of speaking communication skills. Students can, for example, do reading and writing tasks on their own, and the teachers can concentrate more on listening and speaking activities in class. In the *Academic Writing* course, the students meet a teacher once every two weeks to discuss and clarify any mistakes they have made in their essays.

3. Tutoring

The e-learning courses, however attractive and cheaper they might seem, require a new approach to teaching. Consequently, the traditional role of the teacher is changing, with the result that the understanding of the word *teacher* itself has altered. In the e-learning courses different names are employed, for example *coach, leader, moderator, facilitator, mediator* or *tutor*. In this article the word *tutor* is used. Gerrard [5] emphasises several features which differentiate online tuition from traditional tuition. Online tuition:

- places greater emphasis on written skills;
- produces a more formal tone;
- does not follow a linear conversation, but instead promotes multiple conversations;
- does not confine teaching to specific times;
- places greater emphasis on student–student learning;
- requires tutors to develop new ways of encouraging participation;
- requires tutors to assess the worth of online contributions.

E-learning tutors have to perform a wide variety of tasks:

- Organising, delivering and evaluating tutorials;
- Providing students with explicit and clear instructions and a study guide;
- Helping students to overcome obstacles so that they achieve their learning objectives;
- Correcting, evaluating and delivering feedback on the students' individual assignments – and returning them, ideally within three days;
- Resolving potential study conflicts;
- Supporting and encouraging the students in their studies by e-mail and discussion;
- Reacting to enquiries and giving advice;
- Sometimes creating the content of the e-learning course, which makes them responsible for its quality.

Wheeler [6] has listed seven skills that e-learning tutors should possess:

- They should be able to support and encourage learners;
- They should not be afraid to take risks with new technologies;
- They should be able to transfer good teaching skills into online contexts;
- They should be good communicators in any medium;
- They should be non-conformists;
- They should thrive in a culture of change;
- They should have the ability to see the big picture.

Berge [7] has identified four main e-tutor roles:

- **Pedagogical or intellectual roles.** These are the most important in the e-learning process. The e-tutor uses questions and probes for student responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills.
- **Social roles.** These involve the creation of friendly and comfortable social environments in which students feel that learning is possible.
- **Managerial or organisational roles.** These involve setting learning objectives; establishing agendas for the learning activities; timetabling learning activities and tasks; clarifying procedural rules and decision-making norms.
- **Technical roles**. These are possibly the most daunting for academics. They involve becoming familiar, comfortable and competent with the ICT systems and software that compose the e-learning environment.

4. Pedagogy

There is no particular pedagogical approach recommended for e-courses. However, certain principles are worth following. The whole course should be divided into separate lessons, with the structure of each lesson following these basic learning steps:

- informing of objectives
- presenting content
- assessing performance
- providing feedback

The particular structure of each of our lessons is:

- Title;
- Goal – a short statement motivating the participants to study the particular lesson;
- Prerequisites – previous knowledge required to master the lesson;
- Skills to be learnt – a description of the knowledge to be gained in the particular lesson;
- Body – the content in the form of texts, exercises and questions.
- Tasks, quizzes or assignments – ways in which understanding can be assessed in order to provide feedback.

5. Problems

At the introductory tutorial students are acquainted with the e-subject, its content and requirements. Furthermore, they are shown how to use the WebCT virtual learning environment. Unfortunately, it is often the case, in our experience, that not all the students participate in the introductory tutorial. This can cause slight problems later on, not only for the tutor but also for the students themselves. The principal issue seems not to be problems with the operation of the virtual learning environment, but students being unsure of where to find all the necessary

information and which tools of the virtual learning environment to use. Those students who were not present (and sometimes even those who were) at the introductory tutorial often do not read the syllabus, information about the goals of the subject or announcements about the continuous tutorial. As a result, they miss the deadlines of some assignments. This means that they do not receive any marks for these assignments. Another problem seems to be that the students who opt for e-learning language courses tend to be those with lower levels in the target language. This makes it impossible for some students to finish the online course.

6. Conclusion

Online teaching/learning is part of a contemporary trend towards personalisation and individualisation of learning that has been made possible by advancements in information technology. Overall, one can claim that the role of the teacher has evolved from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach, such as on/line teaching, consulting and mentoring. However, such teaching imposes great demands on its creators and the tutors who deliver it. They must necessarily comply with new requirements if they want their e-learning tutoring to be a success. Therefore, to avoid the above-mentioned problems, the instructions for working in the e-learning environment should be written clearly and concisely and all the students (both present and absent) should be made aware of reading them thoroughly before they start their work in the on-line course. Moreover, students should not be afraid of contacting their tutor if they are not sure how to handle some tasks or assignments. Then, e-learning can be challenging both for tutors and students.

As Sulcic and Sulcic [8] state, *online tutors do play an important role in supporting e-learning delivery and can perhaps help to improving the alarming drop-out figures e-learning course have been showing in the past years. Online tutors help to fulfil student expectations that can cause students to drop-out if they remain unmet. This is especially important for part-time students that apparently don't get sufficient support from traditional learning. Because of the importance of the role of online tutors, it is necessary to choose individuals with a set of existing skills that can be developed through careful prepared training programs. Only well-trained tutors will be able to satisfy student expectation about the quantity, frequency and quality of learning supporting activities. We combined these findings in a general model* (see Table 1.) *for online tutoring that tries to identify the key elements of quality tutoring support for e-learning.*

Table 1. A model for online tutors [8]
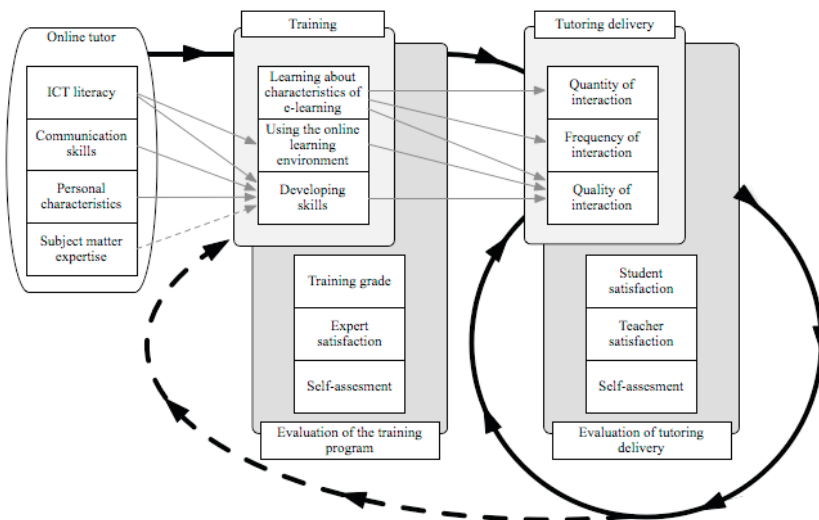
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