

Looking for the excellence in eLearning initiatives. Methodology and training of online tutoring¹

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Abstract: - The aim of this paper is to analyze the main issues to be considered in order to design a quality framework for eLearning. Among other aspects, the active role of online tutors will be shown as a fundamental activity to achieve excellence in eLearning activities. To know how online tutors really work, the training program to be followed by those who desire to become online tutors will be shown, as so as their methodology, skills and competences.

Key-Words: - eLearning, online tutoring, teaching roles, quality framework for eLearning, eLearning methodology, training of trainers, collaborative working.

1 Introduction

Although online instruction, with its implied methods and tools, can not be considered a new phenomenon at the present time, it is clear that the evident growth and diffusion of this training modality did not come with the appropriate success and did not respond to the optimistic expectations foreseen by its pioneers. 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.

According to the General Study of the Internet released in Spain in 2005 (<http://www.egi.es>) 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 [4]. But not only users are unsatisfied. A recent survey, carried out in the U.S. among 109 university and college administrators, asked for a candidate to obtain a faculty position [1]: 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 [10] 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).

Do the most of our eLearning courses satisfy these demands expressed by corporations for "ideal" online initiatives? Obviously not. And what should we do to change this situation by developing quality eLearning courses?

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In the next pages we will try to develop a quality framework for eLearning and, between the whole elements concerned in this context, human factor in eLearning and, consequently, methods and training of tutors for eLearning courses will be emphasized as the cornerstone to achieve excellence in online institutions, courses and initiatives.

2 Quality framework for eLearning. The human factor as quality factor

Online training has experienced many changes from its origins a couple of decades ago. In fact, it is possible to state the existence of different *eLearning generations* in order to understand how this training modality did evolve [13]. The *first generation* of eLearning can be characterized by the developing of learning technology and tools, as so as the transition of learning contents from physical to digital formats. The *second generation* could be defined as the age for developing a certain *model* for eLearning initiatives and the search of quality criteria. An evolution of this second generation (let us call it *second-advanced generation*) consists on the development of a quality model based upon the significance of human factor for eLearning. According to the reports and surveys shown a few lines ago, human factor is being much esteemed to declare an eLearning course as a quality eLearning initiative. So human presence in eLearning is now emphasized even over technological issues, without overlooking them, of course. Actually, according to a recent report analyzing the demand of online master degrees in Spanish [5], “participation of student in the virtual learning community led by the academic team will be crucial for successfully obtain the planned goals” [5, p. 20].

Finishing the question concerning the concept of *generation* applied to eLearning, the *third generation* of eLearning will be probably defined by the incorporation of intelligent tutoring systems, not for substituting human tutors but for helping them to improve their work.

But when we mean “quality”, and apply this term to eLearning, what are we exactly referring to?

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) [6]. 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

eLearning 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 personalized 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 idea of eLearning generations described above, we find that web-based technology and tools are being continuously improved and, consequently, there is an interest for quality on the matter. By the other hand, learning contents are permanently revised, so to match them with new technological supports as to engage them with the newest didactical trends. Therefore, the components belonging to the first eLearning generation are updated and quality-controlled. The same thing occurs to the assessment and accreditation systems, and to the rest of services (not only technological) usually present in VLEs and online courses.

With regard to the second generation, it could be said that certain trends on building eLearning initiatives (like constructivism, for example) are very influent and, so to speak, are “in fashion”. These trends really build eLearning models, but do not ensure good learning achievements by themselves and, actually, even with the better constructivist methodologies and tools there are many well-planned courses that do not fulfil the expected quality level. Why?

This is probably because we need to pass from the second to the so-called “second-advanced” generation of eLearning to ensure the better quality for online courses. In fact, *learning* (never mind if it is “e-” or “b-” or “distance”) is a communicative human activity, and this implies the necessity to communicate knowledge, skills and competences between humans with the net and the computers as *simple* tools, and not to create a communication environment between humans and computers, because computers (still) do not communicate, in the real sense of the word.

So when we try to analyze the probable causes of academic failure in e-learning initiatives, we find that it could be produced due to any of these four kinds of causes [12]:

- 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.

3 Concept, modalities and methodology of tutoring online

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 in the present time.

It is possible to develop adaptative 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 adaptative 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 for ensure that students achieve the skills and goals planned for the course) is only possible if held by specific *human* learning roles.

Furthermore, we are not sure that a learning model built around the student should be an excellent and quality learning model, neither for eLearning nor for any other form of learning, because learning it is very difficult when done with a feel of loneliness, and this sensation occurs frequently in eLearning courses, even more the more "single-student-centred" the model is. From Vygotsky and Bruner [14], [15]; [2], but also from Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, we know how important is the *social context* to create and build knowledge. The concept of "school", with its social space and organization, it is still the better place, the *agora* for learning, building and sharing knowledge, and also for acquiring skills. A learning space must not be firstly an information space, but a social and community space.

And in a social space like a learning environment is, communication plays a basic role. In fact, learning is a communication act, and the more effective and well-regulated should be this communication flux, the more possibilities to achieve an excellent learning activity we have.

So now we have the main gaming rules for creating a learning space: community and communication. But will we be able to set up such a space without

moderation, without monitoring the learning activity? It is clear that teaching roles in eLearning will not disappear, but should be changed to the figure of the old *Mentor*, the companion and guide. We must change the focus from "teaching" to "learning", and the main character of this scenario will be the community of learners, but they will not work alone themselves; it is crucial to count on a monitoring role to ensure the best learning goals.

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". The communication scheme is the classical situation shown in any classroom: one-to-all, where the feedback it is difficult to perceive and the acquisition of contents is "presupposed", but not immediately demonstrated. Thanks to the actual technology and the capability to communicate in an asynchronous way, many things have changed from the communication scheme (all-to-all) to the lead role of teacher (if exists) in eLearning activities. Now we have to find out which the learning role in eLearning is, and which methods will be used to perform this work.

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 a teaching role. 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. In fact, teaching staff in eLearning is "tutoring staff", if we

consider “teacher” as the one who follows and stimulates students’ learning process.

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 learning 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 (personal tutoring situation), one-to-all (conventional classroom lessons), 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 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 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).

3.1 Modalities of tutoring

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).
- Psycho-pedagogical (didactics).
- Personal (mentor, coach, counsellor).

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.

3.2 Tutoring methodology in eLearning activities

As we said a few lines ago, tutor is the only role present in every section of a learning project. In fact, to ensure a quality learning initiative it is fundamental to involve tutors from the beginning of the learning plan in order to take advantage of their experience and developing a flexible but consistent learning plan for the activity. Other important question is the personal implication of tutors in the creation process of learning contents. These two processes (learning design and learning contents developing) will be usually leaded by a didactical department and a sum of experts on every knowledge area, but the academic tutors will be finally responsible to take both (learning design and materials) to every single student, and by participating in this process it will be easier to evaluate any error and miss-coordination will be prevented.

The working methodology of academic tutors could be stated in five phases or moments, with different tasks to be developed in every phase. They will be ordered chronologically, as so as they occur in the learning process:

- a. Course background.
- b. Unit plan.
- c. Student activity.
- d. In itinere settings.
- e. Evaluation process.

4 Training of tutors online

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 these 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 [13], [8]:

- a. Scientific competences.

- b. Technological skills.
- c. Methodological, didactical and psychopedagogical skills [9].
- d. Communication skills.
- e. Social skills and leadership.
- f. Evaluation skills.
- g. Quality skills.

Competences expected from tutors are ambitious and multi-disciplinary, and it is really difficult to develop a learning strategy to train professionals for e-learning courses. In the world of eLearning, actually, the most expensive element is the training and remuneration of tutors. By one hand, their training process consists on a complex suit of competences that are very difficult to obtain in a short training period. Technological issues could be learned with relative effortlessness, but communication skills, leadership and a certain *savoir faire* to manage a learning community are not easy to gain in a few months of specific preparation. By the other hand, tutoring is the only component in eLearning that cannot be re-used at all. The learning design and contents, if positively evaluated, are partially re-usable and, within the natural improvement, should remain for a limited number of course editions. Technology is a simple tool, a Mindtool at best [7], but computers as mindtools are *unintelligent* tools and “the appropriate role for a computer system is not that of a teacher/expert” [3, p. 5]. This role must be held by the online tutor, and his job is ever new, because every single learning situation is different from each other. The tutor is the only *really-intelligent-component* available in eLearning.

Consequently, the better results on training tutors are achieved if counting on adult candidates with leading and/or teaching experience, with good communication (writing) skills. In the next few lines a case study developed by the University of Salamanca (Spain) will be described.

The University of Salamanca carries out, since 2004, a Long-life-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 four editions. It is an online course that certifies 300 hours and 15 ECTS (European Credit

Transfer System), whose methodology is based upon simple principles:

- Small groups.
- Strong tutorial presence and high interaction. Every unit (1-3 weeks) has one or two specific Academic tutors.
- Learning by doing. Activities are the basis of “Tutor online” Diploma.
- Academic, Psychopedagogical and Personal tutoring.
- Collaborative working
- Social knowledge building.
- Intensive learning program.
- Integral and not specialized training.
- Learning and tutoring from the first week.
- Focused to both Academic and Company realities.
- Creation of a “real” final eLearning course.

“Tutor online” Diploma was initially planned as a long-life-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 [11].

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

5 Conclusion

The expansion of eLearning as a new paradigm for learning did not come with the expected results, as many studies have clearly shown. However, the deception of eLearning initiatives must not be considered “implicit” to this new learning modality. In fact, there is not a “better” or “worst” learning modality, at least not by principle. The most important aspect to consider is to match every learning modality with its appropriate methodology, instruments and teaching roles.

Therefore, eLearning failure is due to the acquisition of wrong methods, coming from distance learning, and to the wrong conception of online learning as a “space of loneliness” connecting users to eLearning systems or, at best, several users interacting themselves to build knowledge without a clear learning plan. ELearning is not “learning alone without teachers”, nor learning without a definite plan and with absolute freedom. Without trying to defend a cognitive approach of learning, the constructivist paradigm itself is not enough to get the better learning results; and even worst if by “constructivism” and “social knowledge” we

understand the availability of a space open to interaction without an expert management and monitoring, hoping that learning will come spontaneously simply by means of the interaction between learners. This does not occur in most cases, even when learners are adults.

If we want to ensure real learning, it is crucial to perform a teaching role in eLearning initiatives. Obviously we cannot reproduce the model from in classroom teachers, but teaching role in eLearning will not be reduced to a “human FAQ section” or a “motivation message-sender”. The tutoring presence, even when actually promoting social knowledge and a constructivist approach, is the cornerstone to ensure an excellent learning activity and the effective evaluation of the whole process.

Even if we assume an active, “learning-by-doing” and “social” methodology, the model of an expert guide for this process, as seen from the Ancient Greeks and embedded in their *paideía*, is the better guarantee to get the better results in eLearning activities.

Finally, the cornerstone of excellence in eLearning is the training of the human factor involved in the teaching-to-learning process, especially the teaching roles held by the online tutors. Even with the better learning design and materials, assisted by the most powerful and interactive eLearning tools, without counting on a fine training program to obtain expert online tutors success will not be ensured.

In these pages we did try to explain how online tutors develop their work and which methodology will practice, as so as how these eLearning *mentors* should be trained.

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