Tutor Online. An eLearning Student View

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Abstract: - The role of the online teacher has been extensively studied. However, that has not been the case with the student. Understanding the differences between online and classroom-based courses is the previous step to become a successful *e*Learning student. This paper reflects on the role of the online learner and draws some conclusions about the key qualities these students need to be successful in any eLearning setting, from the perspective of the Continuing Education and Specialization course *Technologies and Methods in Networked Learning:* Tutor Online *(TOL)*, held by the University of Salamanca (Spain) from 2004.

Key-Words: - **eLearning, roles of online student, collaborative networked learning, lifelong learning, knowledge building, learner-centred education**

1 Introduction

It is unquestionable that distance education has experienced a remarkable evolution and revolution over recent years due to the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

These tools have enabled better access to training. Teaching and learning processes have evolved, accordingly provoking a shift in student and teacher profiles. The latter is no longer the knowledge holder, but shifts towards the fresh role of the tutor as **facilitator** of the educational process, which has now become life-long learning.

Yet this new figure has been comprehensively studied and a subsequent number of papers have extensively analyzed the role of the online tutor, which has not been the case with the role of the online student, whose tasks must also change.

This paper we reflects on the role of the eLearning student, from our experienced perspective as online tutors in the Continuing Education and Specialization course *Technologies and Methods in Networked Learning:* Tutor Online *(TOL)*. The course is offered by the University of Salamanca and promoted by the **GR**oup of **I**nvestigation and Inter**A**ction in e**L**earning (GRIAL), which we belong to.

Participants who successfully accomplish the course goals are qualified to carry out the role of tutorship in any eLearning context, at both academic, and professional and corporate levels. Keeping high standards of quality is our commitment, since we consider the tutor's professional profile to be the broadest by far, amongst the actors who take part in the process of high-qualification online training.

Anchored in collaborative work, our methodology is developed, basically, on discussion boards, where learners practice and perform their tasks in small groups.

Particular emphasis is placed on evaluation, which is established on the basis of 70% for participation in the different discussion boards, and 30% for personal and group work.

Aimed at graduates interested in eLearning issues and at professionals from the field, this 300-hour course has satisfactorily completed its fourth edition. Involving approximately one hundred participants from almost ten different countries, it was first implemented in September 2004.

2 The Roles of the Student. A Case Study: *Tutor Online*

The following features appear to be shared by the participants in the course *Tutor Online (TOL)*:

- Almost all of them are graduates.
- They are chiefly from Spanish speaking countries.
- They log onto the course platform from Spanish speaking countries.
- They are mainly aged between 30 and 50.

2.1 Learning Styles

Using a learner-centred approach, the course has been carefully designed and great emphasis is placed on a collaborative methodology, which is presented and applied from the very beginning of the course. The tutors encourage, motivate, help, and monitor the participants, and, most significantly, create presence.

While being new to the abilities required, most students quickly acquire them and feel comfortable with their brand new instrumental competencies. Such relevant progress makes them feel confident enough to perform brilliantly in the course discussion boards, thus feeling extremely satisfied, regardless of the fact that, for most of them, this is their first experience in this kind of collaborative learning environment.

> *[…]It came to my mind this morning that, in this course, we learn a lot "while" doing; and I, until now, studied the theory, and when I had grasped it thoroughly, used to start doing the practice. We'll have to get used to this new method. Anyway, we shouldn't forget what the tutors say, what matters is not the final outcome, but what we learn during the process to get to/achieve it. […]*
> *I.S.M. (TOL III. Discussion Board: El Mus, 2/2/2006)*

Nevertheless, although the course dropout rates hover around 14%, we are well aware of the fact that not all the students develop the essential skills to adapt to this kind of learning. Funnily enough, this has been the case with certain instances of eLearning professionals who certainly belong to and are used to more traditional situations.

Moreover, their lack of participation makes them feel overwhelmed when they access the course discussion boards and see the great number of messages posted by the tutors and the rest of the learners during their absence.

Expressing excuses when faced with that situation is the most frequent reaction. However, some others even show their feelings of anguish when unable to cope with the activities set by the tutors, or when not managing to combine their personal work with that in their small groups

That is why these students often feel that their expectations are unfulfilled, especially because they are not prepared to get up and make the change.

> *Hi, everybody. Though a bit late, here we are.*

> *In my opinion, it's being really hard to read all the messages you've posted in the different discussion boards in the course. Then, I'd suggest that the tutor should "sift" those messages by selecting the relevant ones. But…of course, the trouble is what you said, how would you judge the potential relevancy of a message?[…]*
> *S.C.M. (TOL IV. Discussion Board: Group 3. 12/07/2006)*

2.2 Typology of messages from the participants: the Framework

We have done a small scale qualitative research and we can establish several types of postings placed on the different discussion boards of the course by the participants. This survey led us to the conclusion that students whose participation, though valuable, was sporadic and irregular, tend to be the most likely to fail; irrespective of their previous knowledge of eLearning or online tutoring.

Highly motivated students, who take part every day, visit the social discussion boards, ask for help and encourage other mates' participation, are the most successful; even though they may possibly start with an utter lack of knowledge of the matters dealt with in the course.

Here follows a typology according to the content, which is far from being a thorough analysis of the students' postings to the discussion boards in the course.

- **Relevant messages:** Useful information is provided by a student in order to contribute to knowledge building.

  > *[…]From my point of view, communication consists of sharing, showing news, ideas, feelings, etc. with other people.*
  >
  > *This act of sharing may have different objectives: Communicating in order to inform, Communicating in order to make something understood, to sooth, to negotiate, to teach and to "persuade".*
  >
  > *Then, persuasion would be a kind of communication, different from just information, and a set of diverse communicative strategies would come into play.*
  > *N.G.R. (TOL II Discussion Board: Debate on J. Santiago Guervós's texts).*

- **Information messages:** A participant tells their mates about any aspect related to the course content. Some bibliographical references or other findings from their own learning process are provided.

  […] I have found an article I read time ago. I recommend it to you. http://www.mandarina-learning.com/%c2%bfque-es-mejor-e-learning-o-blended-learning/. It is about the dichotomy between mere traditional distance education and blended learning… and about the panacea usually launched by the marketing business... [...]
  J.B.M. (TOL III. Discussion Board: B-Learning, 6/4/2006)

- **Synthesis messages:** Part of the knowledge mastered in the course is compiled, either for their own sake and/or that of their mates.

  […]I'm uploading a summary of the text by Sicilia-Sánchez.
  LO.- It is an independent, self-contented, long-lasting digital didactic unit, reusable in different learning contexts, thanks to the self-descriptive information, called "Metadata".
  METADATA.- It is like the outside label f a product. In the case of the LO, it describes the content, technical requirements, possible contexts, etc. [...]
  INSTRUCTIVE DESIGN.- It deals with the plans or activities that a particular designer (educator, teacher, etc.) determines as appropriate in order to achieve certain learning objectives. [...]
  SCORM.-It's a group of learning specifications and standards (The most widely used for LOs.)[...].
  REPOSITORIES.- They are systems that provide access to collections of LOs. [...]MERLOT and CAREO are instances of them. [...]
  J.Z.O. (TOL IV Discussion Board: Doubts, questions and definitions. 7/6/2006)

- **Messages asking for help:** A learner asks the tutor or their mates for help.

  […] Once more, you slip through my fingers, or rather, from my screen…you go from one platform to another, I'm still lost in Dokeos, but thanks to you who always help me in my ignorance, I guess I'll learn a bit from this platform. The
  truth is it looks good, though it's quite comprehensive, so I'll take some time and a few questions to understand everything.
  Now, let's get to work, and I'm still thinking about the topic, when I get it, who I'm supposed to tell? To the tutor who will help me, or to all of them? [...]
  C.A.G.P. (Discussion Board: We're opening new fronts in war. 11/11/2004)

- **Messages offering help:** A student offers clarification by answering a question posted by another participant.

  [...]Actually, T., when I read your message with questions, I grinned from ear to ear (bad, I am!) while thinking "Hey!/Well, well, this guy has also got doubts". Anyway, in the end, the sort of doubt disappointed me, but, after all/anyway, let it go!
  N.'s answer was right. We have to submit the Project document for Friday 7...: In principle, the tutors only asked me to fill it in with the Skype information and the photos, but I think it's a very good idea to add the title of the course and implementation platform (if we know).
  As for dates, April 17 to 20 is the period (not maximum) to submit our COURSE in full (it'll be up to some of us to work during the holidays.)
  Any more doubts? Shoot, I'm paid for stopping bullets.[…]
  P.A.S. (TOL III. Discussion Board: Questions about Assignment delivery. BSCW. 6/4/2006)

- **Organizational messages:** As we strongly believe in *learning by doing*, participants in this course are asked to play the part of the tutor for a number of weeks in order to develop their vital instrumental skills. In turns, each learner assumes the role of an online tutor in order to manage and monitor the tasks within a given subgroup.

  […] I'm uploading a Word compilation of the filling forms received. Now it's up to you to debate and polish the document. I'm going to suggest you this way of working: In order to share out the task of modification as the debate progresses, you must inform the group about your intention of modification. So, we'll find out that you have the rights of edition, comment on the modifications you intent

to implement and, when you finish, post a new message to this thread enclosing the document modified, and assign it a new version. In doing so, you are setting the document free in order to be modified by the following TOL, as the debate progresses. Be careful with the timing of your work of editing and don't let it go for too long, so as not to block the participation of your group mates. Who will take over?
M.P.M. *(Discussion Board: Questions about the handing in of assignments. TOL IV Group 1. 13/07/06)*

- **Feedback messages:** A student gives feedback on another participant's posting.

  [...] Thanks for your comments, they're all great, you should have been here before in order to help use even more. Can you tell us something more about Macromedia and SCORM packages?[...]
  G.J.C. (TOL III. Discussion Board: How to make a SCORM package 6/2/2006)

- **Encouragement messages:** A learner cheers up another participant, who may feel discouraged about their ability to follow the pace of the course or to accomplish a task. Sometimes, the message is a congratulatory one.

  [...] I didn't want to miss the opportunity to tell you congratulations for your excellent work as a coordinator. You've been an exceptional tutor during these two weeks, bearing in mind that, besides, many of us were not familiar with the topic, and that work hasn't always been easy. I must admit you've always been standing by, in order to help us with the difficulties that have arisen; providing solutions and sharing your knowledge. Just, thank you for volunteering to be a tutor, though, indeed, it's high time for a change.

  Thank you for your readiness/willingness and your good work.
  S.P.M. (TOL III Discussion Board: Group 3: LOs evaluated 6/2/2006)

- **Discouragement messages:** Usually, when facing a task which some student may feel overwhelmed, they communicate their downhearted mood to the group. This kind of

posting often occurs at the beginning of a module and, quite often, it is the very same student who changes their mind a few days later, when the leaning situation is again under control. A succession of replies from the other participants as well as the tutor's, are often yielded in support.

[...] What a week! I think most f us have suffered different moods: surprise, despair, critical, normal, viruses on attack,...That's why, I wish you a relaxed weekend. I also wanted to mention that I like this sort of collaborative learning, and we can use other people's works and opinions, and vice versa. [...]
I.S.M. (TOL III Discussion Board: El Mus. 27/1/2006)

- **Social messages:** Some personal information is offered, especially in the course's informal, off-topic message boards, often called *Bar* or *Cafeteria*. Family, hobbies, personal interest, expectations, distressing factors are some of the commonest topics dealt with by the students. These issues lay the foundations for a relaxed and empathetic atmosphere amongst the participants.

  Contrary to all expectations, not all participants find these informal boards useful, since they are depicted as banal or not relevant. Perhaps, these students do not believe in the value/benefit of sharing any kind of information not closely related to their educational purposes.

  However, we believe in the particular benefit of group cohesion and, it is not really a coincidence that the most active learners in the academic boards, are also those who enthusiastically participate in the social boards.

  [...] Today is TUESDAY and as every Tuesday I'm up to my ears in work; I get home sometime after 11 pm and I get up before the sunrise... I SHOULD SAY: "I HATE TUESDAYS!!! Instead of Mondays... ha, ha, ha.

  The thing is I've been able to get one minute to access from the office and, I couldn't resist asking for another "rebujito" for me!!! I'm dying for it (ha, ha). In this course, many of us are virtual alcoholics.
  S.P.M. (TOL III. Discussion Board: Mediterranean Bar. 28/3/2006)

- **Introspection messages:** A participant is aware of their own learning process and assesses their progression.

  [...] This week has been a handicap for me, since the topic in the discussion board in new to me. Beginning with the materials from the didactic programme, placed in "contents"; ignoring what was expected from me, the work I had to do; not knowing the other participants in the group; my lack of ability for group work; and my weakness for subtleties. All this made me take all my instruments and started to play on my own. As the week progressed, communication was getting smoother and my initial uncertainty disappeared [...]

  J. M. P. M. (TOL IV. Discussion Board: Practising Tutors 16/07/2006)

3 The Roles of the Online Student: the Portrait

The three-dimensioned relationship established amongst the learners, the tutor and the course materials bears particular features related to this collaborative environment

In order to be successful, eLearning students are supposed to be acquainted with their brand new role as active learners. Although permanently supported by the tutor, who monitors and guides them, the students should assume the following core qualities as their own:

- The passive role played in traditional training should be forgotten, and students must become the main actors of their own learning process. This means showing a proactive attitude, working sometimes, independently and others, in groups.
- Some basic knowledge of computers at user level is vital. It is recommended to have a good access to the Internet, free from severe timetable constraints.
- Self-motivation is a key issue for succeeding in their learning process, given that the individual effort required for the workload implied in a course of this type is high. As an example, they are expected to keep up to date with the discussion boards and access them on a daily basis.
- A high frustration threshold is vital in order to cope with the new and, quite often, unpredictable environment. A newcomer may feel lost because of the

new parameters they are in: a different way of learning, task managing, different idea of space and time (synchrony and asynchrony).

- Above all, the students are supposed to participate. They must seek for an active learning; build knowledge by interacting with their mates. They should be available to the rest of the learners, and pose questions, doubts, which will be sorted out by other participants or the tutor. Their tasks must be submitted properly carried out and on time.
- They must be in command of their own learning process by managing their free time and their own study strategies. Individuals should elaborate their own personal work programme, suitable to meet the needs of the learning process they are taking part in.
- The allotted time for the course is crucial. Since it is meant for adults, they must manage to fit their study amongst their many other activities, yet, the course should not be left aside. Their participation in the course, for example, in the discussion boards, and collaboration with the other learners, needs time to be properly carried out.
- Study materials, submitted by the tutors need to be meticulously grasped by the participants, who, in addition, should do their own searches so as to expand the topics. As a result, the students achieve the **role of content managers**, and become active learners, not only by searching out and managing content, but also, by constituting the so called, Resource Library.
- With the aim of creating and strengthening bonds amongst the participants and the tutors, the *TOL* course holds some social discussion boards, apart from the purely instructive ones. These boards are also a useful approach to making the students familiar with the learning platform. The students are supposed to contribute to these social boards to reinforce the sense of belonging to the group, which will actually smooth the path for the other students to get involved in the collaborative activities later on.
- Being able to skilfully write clear texts and express themselves in a formally

correct way, as well as following the so called netiquette when posting on the course boards, become fundamental qualities for online communication.

- Students are offered the opportunity to practise the **role of the tutor** in turns, playing the part of moderators and leading the debates in small groups. In doing so, they experience the challenges and difficulties an online tutor faces: activating all the participants, rescuing those who are left behind, managing and timing all the work, assessing the other students' postings, etc.
- Realistic self-evaluation is an ability that the participants need to master in order to avoid a potential over estimation of their production. Therefore, including proper evaluation tools during the course is a must.
- The participants assess and evaluate their mates' projects, as an instance of co-evaluation.
- During the process of evaluation, the learners have to be able to assess both the *TOL* course and all the works in the process: activities, tasks, projects, acquiring and experiencing the **role of the evaluator**.
- The **role of the content creator** should essentially be assumed by the participants. Their compilations and projects become a valuable part of the course resource database. At this stage, the students shift away from being plain and passive content readers of the materials provided by the tutors, to being active content creators. During that fruitful and crucial transition, the learners bring together all the competencies and strategies developed, knowledge mastered, skills and abilities trained in order to effectively manipulate them in a meaningful way. This higher cognitive process fosters the scenario for knowledge building, either by a student in isolation or in a group situation.
- As a Final Project, students are required to implement an eLearning course by putting together every item of the design process. Here the learner plays the **role of the designer**. In a preliminary step of this activity, the students are asked to hand in a first draft of their project, including a brief justification of its value. This is the beginning of a feedback process, a synergy among all the actors taking part in the course. The aim of this activity is to bring together the instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competencies acquired along the course by the students.

4 Conclusions

Joining a training programme like *TOL* entails being prepared to share the same learning goals with the tutors and the other participants, and contribute to the group common nurturing. That mutual bond aids and smoothes the path of the progress of new knowledge building.

In contrast to traditional distance education, an eLearning student cannot work alone with the study material delivered into their mailbox and later, submit the activities to the tutors. Rather, they must be prepared for close interpersonal relationships.

The commitment to develop shared teamwork and the will to progress together need to emanate from each participant with respect to the rest of the people involved: tutors and students. The aim is to develop the learning process itself within its social connotation, rather than bare knowledge acquisition.

There is a risk that some student does not assume that commitment and limits their work to a mere individualistic task submission, somewhat personal and original, as a compendium of information which is far from being an outcome of their learning process in the *TOL* course.

This unique opportunity to take part in a mutually supportive online learning process, which is never the same, would be wasted. They would be prone to fail, unless the tutor is able to help them back into the process.

Seeking the reasons and consequences of these failures will help us implement all the necessary modifications in later courses, and it becomes a steady challenge for this mutually supportive online learning initiative, TOL.

The figure of the psychopedagogist is crucial in detecting early potential drop-outs and in giving remedial support.

Assessment and evaluation processes become a must in terms of take-up, efficiency, effectiveness and return on investment (ROI).

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6 Acknoledgements