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Roles and Competencies of the e-Tutor

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the roles and competencies of the e-tutor. A literature review shows that different roles are assigned to the online tutors. Definitions of these roles are presented and discussed. Afterwards, we present eleven roles we consider important to manage the interactions between learners and tutors in an e-learning environment and the competencies needed to support these tutor's roles. We conclude that to improve the quality of e-learning the tutor's interventions have to be adapted to a specific context and we propose to train the e-tutors for these roles.

Keywords
Tutor Roles, Tutor Competencies, E-learning, e-tutor.

INTRODUCTION

Many writers see tutor support as being critical to the educational process and the students learning experience. Reasons for the importance of tutor support in a technology-mediated learning environment range from practical reasons such as reduction of drop out rates, theoretical reasons such as mitigating student isolation, and moral reasons such as the obligation to help students succeed (see for example, Lentell, 2003; Simpson, 2002). As Bennett and Mash (2002) note, "To be an effective online tutor, it is clearly not enough to know which buttons to press in order to send an e-mail or which HTML coding is required to insert an image on a web page" (p. 14).

What the preceding implies is the support provided by e-tutors requires e-tutors to adopt several unique roles depending on, for example, the epistemological framework and the tasks the learners have to manage (e.g. individual or collaborative work). From a mere transmitter of knowledge, the e-tutor becomes much more, a facilitator of learning. Further, to design and animate an online environment, additional staff or roles may also be necessary (Denis, 2003). From a literature review and practice analyses, this paper discusses our view of what is necessary in terms of e-tutor competencies for specific e-tutor roles. We propose a list of possible e-tutor's roles on which the members of the EQUEL Special Interest Group[1] on "Contextualised Tutor's Roles and Tutor Training" have agreed. We hope this discussion will contribute to defining what could be the profession of e-tutoring.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our literature review shows that different terms such as online tutor, online moderator, e-moderator, distance education tutor, e-tutor and definitions are used to refer to the same or similar roles. Further some competencies are described by several authors, however many of these scholars emphasise only one or two aspects of these competencies.

Barker (2002) for example, provides the following list of roles of e-tutors including "... 'pastoral care' of students in terms of advising them about careers and course choices, marking student's assignments and coursework and providing feedback on submitted material" (p. 7). Barker also adds the roles of moderating conferences, acting as mentors to less-experienced colleagues and doing quality control of other e-tutors' work.

Ryan *et al* (2000) suggest "The main role of the online tutor is that of educational facilitator: to contribute specialist knowledge and insight, focus the discussion on the critical points, to ask questions and respond to student's contributions, weave together disparate comments and synthesize the points made to foster emerging themes" (p.110). Ryan *et al* add that tutors also needs skills for nurturing online collaboration, creating an atmosphere of openness, assuring all participants their contributions are valued and welcome, building rapport within the group to help members to explore ideas, different perspectives and to take ownership of their learning.

Lentell (2003) notes, "Tutors facilitate and guide the learning of their students so that the students gain knowledge and understanding. To achieve this, tutors develop and practice a multitude of skills and strategies" (p. 67). Lentell states the typical duties of a distance education tutor include ensuring students have grounding in the subject and providing students with academic support in the subject matter. Further roles include assisting students in exploring the links between different course modules and integrating work experience with academic knowledge.

Simpson (2002) describes two broad areas of tutor support, academic and non-academic: "The first is academic (or tutorial) support – which deals with supporting students with the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses or sets of courses. This will include, for example, developing general learning skills, numeracy and literacy. The second is non-academic or counselling support – the support of students in the affective and organizational aspects of their studies. Within each of these areas are sub-divisions" (p.7).

Simpson also argues that any theory of student support reflects various ideas about counseling such as humanistic or person-centered, a Rogerian model. Rogers (1951) argues for student-centered teaching rather than being based on the assumption that 'you can't trust the student', which he says, teachers acting on this assumption will see themselves as needing to "Supply motivation, information, organization of the material, and must use examinations … at every turn to coerce the student into the desired activates" (p.427). Rogers advocates the approach that 'You can trust the student' and acting on this assumption teachers will be more inclined to create a climate of respect and acceptance which is accepting of the emotionalised situation of educational or group experience and the tutor sees themselves as a member of a learning group, rather than an authority. The teacher will make learning resources available, relying on the basis of continuing experience and recognizes that any course is a beginning and not the end of learning. Lastly, relying upon the students to assess their progress and having confidence in this atmosphere, which they have helped create, a type of learning takes place, which is personally meaningful and supports the self-development of the individual as well as the subject knowledge. Rogers' view seems to oppose a trend that we hope will not continue in academic institutions, consumer behaviour, and viewing the student as a 'customer'.

We do not agree with some authors such as Duggleby's (2000) view of the role of an e-tutor which she states as: "If you think of your role as part teacher, part party host and part sheepdog, then you will have more or less the right approach!" (p. 118). This seems to stretch the roles and competencies of an e-tutor to the extremes!

Our view is learner centered and based on a socioconstructivist approach. This means that the learner is active in building his/her knowledge. The e-tutor is proactive: he/she intervenes to help the learners to manage the learning resources and their interactions with their tutor and their peers.

In fact these interventions mainly depend on the educational principles (e.g. constructivism, collaboration, isomorphism, …) and on the instructional design of the e-learning environment (Leclercq & Denis, 1994). For instance, some of them emphasise individual learning, other are based on collaborative activities... In the first case, the roles are more focused on methodological and content expertise support, sometimes on providing feedbacks and assessment. Charlier (2000) defines three types of e-learning environments related to the learning paradigm considered: transmission of knowledge, building of individual knowledge and group collaboration to build new knowledge. She associated particular e-tutors roles to each of these paradigms (expert, mentor, group and student counsellor), considering the view of learning, the roles devoted to the technological support, the evaluation, the other learners and some learning conditions.

Whatever the considered situation, we think it is important the e-tutor clarifies and communicates his/her roles to the students. This is a part of what Jacquinot (2002) and Denis (2003) mean by "tutorat d'accueil": first contact, mutual presentations, definition of the objectives of the course, learners motivation, precision of the exigence degree, of the timetable, etc. These interventions aim to suppress isolation or to provide virtual presence cues. Jacquinot suggests other roles related to cognitive and social dimensions, articulation between theory and experience, assessment and management (at the institutional level).

Denis (2003) proposes that, referring his/her own context and epistemological approach, the e-tutor decides how to intervene choosing among seven types of roles: to support the starting activities, to solve technical problems, to answer to content questions, to support methodology requirements (about organisation, working methods, affective aspects, communication and collaboration), to enhance a metacognition process, to assess student's work and to provide 'pastoral care'.

Referring to the collaborative distance learning context of the Learn-Nett campus, Daele & Docq (2002) emphasise four types of roles linked to the management of a group defined by Berge (1995): a social one, an organisational one, a pedagogical one and a technical one. They propose different roles to support individual and group learning. The e-tutor helps each student to define his/her own project, to articulate it to the group project, to reflect on his/her distance collaborative process, to search for resources, to organise synchronous interactions, to respect the guidelines and the agenda, to structure the workgroup, etc. These roles are also developed by Deschryver (2003) .

Lentell (2003) however provides an excellent summary stating, "Tutors need to have knowledge and a broad conceptual understanding of their field. They have to be effective listeners and communicators, to be a coach, facilitator, mentor, supporter and resource. They have to listen, to shape, to give feedback, to motivate, to direct, to appreciate – broadly to be developmental and problem solving."(p. 74).

What this review highlights is also the contextualised nature of the tutor's roles, which lead us to use an approach, which looks at the roles and competencies of the tutor from the perspective of the tutor's interaction with students.

DEFINITION, ROLES AND COMPETENCIES

From this review and practice analyses we selected and agreed on eleven online e-tutor's roles we considered relevant in either a full distance or blended learning environment. First, we defined the e-tutor as *someone who interacts directly with learners to support their learning process when they are separated from the tutor in time and place for some or all these direct interactions.*

From this definition, we further made a distinction between Central Roles (related to interaction) and Peripheral Roles (previous to or after these interactions). In this we are in agreement with Lentell (1994) in which she describes the importance of the student-tutor relationship in comparison

with other student support elements in ODL. Referencing (Cowan, 1994), she states: "Like Cowan, I too consider that important though all the services offered in distance education are, however splendid the printed texts, and however smooth the organisational system, and however refined the quality measurement tools, it is the relationship between the tutor and the learner that determines success or failure" (p. 50).

We feel it is important to also highlight the need to temper each of these Central Roles with a libertarian and humanistic perspective and recognise the students as unique individuals. We agree with Evans (1994) who states, "A similar caution about generalising arises from the myth of 'the learner'. The term has a generic ring about it, but in fact refers to a very wide variety of people with different backgrounds and concerns even within an institution" (p. 225, quoted in Robinson, 1995). Similarly Lentell (2003) notes, "Each student presents particular challenges and thus the tutor-student dialogue has to focus on different things accordingly – for instance understanding the course, lack of appropriate skills required to demonstrate understanding, lack of presentational skills, etc." (p. 67).

We also recognise that there will be disagreement with our categories of roles and that there is considerable overlap in some roles. For example, Thorpe (2002) would see the Peripheral Role of course designer move to a Central Role as she remarks when discussing on-line courses where collaborative learning plays a major role. "Where so much of the content of the course cannot be specified in advance because it is the process and substance that takes place in the on-line interactions, course design and learner support start to merge. Furthermore, since learner support is no longer an add-on to a predefined course, but itself defines what the course becomes, the old model of course design first, learner support second, should be questioned and possibly reversed. Only when we have decided what can be delivered through on-line interaction, will we be in a position to design 'content' and create course materials" (p. 106).

This situation is not new and is similar to that reported in Hardy (1992) quoting Hodgson and Reynolds (1987) commenting on a part-time MA in Management Learning programme Hodgson and Reynolds state, "The tutors were responsible for the overall design of the programme, based on the shared principles that individuals should take responsibility for their own learning and for helping others in theirs" (p.327).

What this illustrates is some of the problems in generalising tutor roles. In some cases it seems that different titles refer to fundamentally the same role and in others the same title involves quite different tasks.

In much the same was as Berge's (1995) widely used classification of the conditions necessary for successful on-line instruction which he categorised into four areas: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical we have used a similar approach however our approach takes its starting point the tutor's interaction with students. This categorisation as well shows that the e-tutor has a large range of roles (e.g. social, technical, didactical, discipline expert, etc) each with the need to develop different types of competencies such as pedagogical, technical, communicational, interpersonal skills, and so on.

The Central Roles we see as linked to interaction between the e-tutor and the learners are:

1. content facilitator: the e-tutor intervenes sometimes as subject expert, sometimes as interpreter and guide through the concepts of study…,
2. metacognition facilitator: he/she supports reflection on learning activities and outcomes, study skills development…,
3. process facilitator: he/she supports learners' learning strategies, time management…,
4. advisor/counsellor: he/she provides pastoral support, doorway to institutional/local support systems,
5. assessor (formative and summative): he/she gives feedback on task achievement and performance, assignment development, sometimes he/she is also examiner…,
6. technologist: he/she is a guide, first-post support with technologies and tools for learning…,

7. resource provider: he/she identifies and locates, develops and produces resources to provide 'just in case' or 'just in time' learning support..

Peripheral Roles are:

8. manager/administrator: the e-tutor supports the management of the course keeping records, checking the enrollements, …

9. designer: he/she can sometimes intervene to help to design the course or course module, the 'lesson' itself – the pedagogies, the tasks to be done....

10. co-learner: often, the role of the e-tutor is not 'stage on the stage' or even 'guide on the side', but genuinely 'friend to the end' of the course, walking with the learner-participants and learning alongside them ;

11. researcher: he/she can be a reflective practitioner and action researcher from his/her e-tutor experience.

Pedagogical and communicational competencies are very important to support the learning process. They are both linked to several categories of the e-tutor's roles: metacognition facilitator, process facilitator, advisor/counsellor and co-learner. These competencies are more or less those required to be a trainer or a teacher. Nevertheless, to interact at a distance is different than in face-to-face (teacher's and learners pace, use of electronic tools, …). That's why the e-tutor has not only to animate and manage groups of learners, but also has to advise them to use the didactical resources, chats and forums, … Then, it is necessary that the e-tutor uses correctly the tools available in the e-learning campus, not only to access to its resources, but also to help the learners if they have some technical problems and when the role of technical support has been attributed to the tutor. Must the tutor be an expert in the domain? We think that to be a content facilitator doesn't mean automatically that the e-tutor is as expert as the author of the course in the discipline. At least, he/she should be able to understand the proposed contents and to provide relevant resources to the learners.

Table 1 summarises the matrix of competencies we see as needed to support these different e-tutors' roles.

Table 1 – Roles and Competencies				
Competencies Roles	Pedagogical	Communicational	Discipline Expertise	Technological
Content facilitator			X	
Metacognition facilitator	X	X		
Process facilitator	X	X		X
Advisor/counsellor	X	X		X
Assessor (formative and summative)	X		X	
Technologist				X
Resource provider			X	X
Manager/administrator				X
Designer			X	X
Co-learner	X	X		
Researcher	X			

Clearly within each aspect of competencies, specific sub competencies can also be identified (e.g. technological competencies can be related to ICT tools use, to the resources production, the platform management, etc.). Further this implies an awareness of which competencies may be required by an e-tutor to complement their existing skill set. In our approach of e-tutor training, we recommend, in the first instance, to consider the competencies supporting interacting with the learner as a minimum requirement.

SUMMARY
To conclude, the e-tutor has more than one role to play in an e-learning environment, including perhaps all of the roles described in this paper. We agree with Ryan *et al* (2000) and Lentell (20003) and envision the roles of e-tutors and the training of e-tutors will continue to change as technology-mediated learning environments continue to be more prevalent in academic institutions (commercialisation), the shift to programs which encourage learners to take greater control over their learning continues (pedagogy), the technology used in these learning environments evolves (information and communication technologies) and of course politics (funding, quality assurance). Further these roles and competencies depend on the educational context: learners, learning outcomes, subject matter, other course provision resources, and so on. Of equal consideration are the e-tutor's existing competencies and any gaps in their competencies related to the roles they will be required to fulfil. As suggested by Bennett and Marsh (2002) tutors are being asked "to run before they can walk" and that "the majority of tutors new to online teaching do not have

the background of online learning experience upon which to draw" (p.15).

Determining the required roles in adapting the tutors' interventions to a specific context and proposing e-tutors' training for these roles we see as improving the quality of e-learning. As Lentell (2003) notes "One can never be confident predicting the future – but one can seek to shape it" (p. 75).

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[1] EQUEL SIG 4 on "Contextualised Tutor's Roles and Tutor Training" associates researchers and professors of different European universities: Liège (B): Denis, B., Pirotte, S. and Verday, N.; Lancaster (UK): Watland, P., Glasgow (UK): McAteer, E. ; Sheffield (UK): Banks, S and the Karolinska Institue (SW): Fors, U. Coordinator is the *Service de Technologie de l' Education – CRIFA* (B. Denis). This project is supported by the EU E-learning programme. The address of the EQUEL website is http://tecfaseed.unige.ch/equel/equel.php