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E-TUTORING AS A WAY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS

Abstract:

Using any kind of technology is becoming more common in the current social reality. Continuous professional development of every human being makes repeatedly in the educational process can be seen attempts to adapt teaching and learning to the needs of the organization of society to meet the needs of individual units. Through the use of information technology in the learning process becomes more efficient and adapted to the requirements of modern times. E-tutoring, in addition to various forms of contemporary functioning of online education, is in addition to the learning process consisting in individual student contact with a teacher/tutor, through a virtual environment, as well as a way to support individuals who want to develop their skills and competencies. Through the use of cyberspace, the idea of tutoring as a method of education and personality development of an individual relationship with a student and a tutor, it is more accessible to the students. In the online environment for interaction between the e-tutor and his dependents can be both synchronous and asynchronous – one e-tutor is therefore able to support their knowledge and experience more people, regardless of location and distance, in which both parties are located.

Keywords: e-tutoring, e-learning, education, e-tutor, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning.

Introduction

Technological development in the field of information and communication has led to a new perception of teaching. With the advent of internet technology the education system has been enhanced with new methods and techniques for teaching using virtual environment. Geographical spread, family, economic and personal factors make these information and communication technologies present in the teaching process important element in the creation and development of individuals and consequently the whole of society.

Information and communication technologies in the learning process play two important roles - the integration of social and economic competitiveness [Morgan-Klein, Osborne 2007: 132]. With the lifting of geographical barriers people all over the world can easily make contact with each other and create groups having one common goal. Cooperation with other people is no longer dependent on place and time and it is also economically competitive. The use of technology leads to a strengthening of interaction and collaboration between people around the world and thus opens the door to new opportunities.

1. Tutoring and e-tutoring

Looking at the modern idea of tutoring we can divide it into a number of ways and methods aimed at student's personal development. An important issue, among others, is the development of "mental flexibility" of students so that they are able to think for themselves in the future [Beck 2008: 15]. Solving problems, multiple possible solutions and reasoning skills are competences necessary to actively participate in social life.

The primary objective of education in the tutoring idea is basically to work out students' independent thinking skills and confidence to their own conclusions and opinions [Clark 2001: 105-109]. One of the tutoring cooperation method can also be a student's metacognitive skills development that relate to the development of conscious perception and understanding of the phenomena taking place in society and the world [Beck 2008: 15].

Tutoring is regarded as the best educational and stimulating way for young man, so we can acquire the skills of critical analysis and understanding of the world and we are able to use these intellectual resources throughout all our life. In the contemporary meaning tutoring is individualized education method and it is based on a direct tutor and student meeting. From the teaching effectiveness point of view, social development (personal and cognitive) of student is very important in tutoring.

In the literature we can find many definitions of both the concept of "tutoring" and "tutor". According to W. Wood tutor is the person who provides support and instructs student. Each student is treated individually by the tutor [Wood 1996: 282].

E-prefix added to the word "tutor" means only an additional contribution of information technology in the field of communication between the tutor and the student. E-tutor communicates virtually with students in order to support the learning process [Denis, Watland, Pirotte, Verday 2004: 18]. Communication can take place both through written text, audio, video – can also be synchronous or asynchronous. E-tutoring takes different forms depending on the technical tools, skills and training methods used by the e-tutor and the student.

According to J. Breur tutoring and e-tutoring tasks are very similar. These include: diagnosing the needs of students, to help students in their personal development, explaining the content, evaluating progress, giving feedback, promotion activities, encouraging and motivating students, solving problems [Breur 2009: 21].

E-tutoring and face-to-face meetings tutoring are different mostly in the form of tutorial session. Therefore, tutoring in the online environment is certainly a challenge for both students and teachers because the dialogue is via the Internet only. The issue to express their thoughts, views and formulate queries and problems in writing requires clear writing skills from both the student and e-tutor. The key to effective action in the virtual environment are primarily tutor's flexibility and skills necessary to be active in cyberspace. E-tutor must demonstrate openness to change and must be ready to "go" in the virtual world with all its advantages and disadvantages or dangers.

E-tutoring is a new medium but the basic skills of a good teacher / tutor are the same, regardless of the method of their application. C. Shepherd mentioned among other e-tutor's skills such as [Shepherd 2009: 15]:

good organization,
familiarity with the structure of the course,
subject expertise,
enthusiasm,
ability to deploy resources effectively,
good relationships with learners,
ability to communicate,
a flexible approach.

E-tutoring is a form of e-learning, using information technology and the Internet. It provides a "private coaching" in the students' home without any additional cost and reducing any students' physical inconvenience. Students also have open access to tutors anywhere in the world.

E-tutoring is based most of all on text education now. E-tutor may be involved in different types of text-based communication (discussion, cooperation, exchange of views, etc.). These interactions can be synchronous and asynchronous and may also involve different types of multimedia techniques necessary for this type of communication.

Requirements for e-tutors are different from traditional requirements for tutors but the overall problems and situations they must cope with are the same. The task of tutors and online tutors is, among others, supporting students in the educational process, motivating them and solving any problems. The difference between a virtual environment and face-to-face activity is the lack of non-verbal instructions, the use of texts as a major means of communication and the limitation imposed by technology. "Changing the roles of academics and teachers challenges established patterns and creates concern, horror even, in those who believe we risk quality (…) in learning provision" [Salmon 2000: 26].

Online tutoring is rapidly expanding field. Continuous development of e-tutors seems to be inevitable. Teachers working in some education programs built on the basis of specific pedagogical models must evolve and adapt their programs to the virtual environment. This change of program may be also a transition to a constructivist paradigm and consequently a change to the current educational practice for someone.

1.1. Synchronous and asynchronous learning

There are two types of online tutoring: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous tutoring is based on the involvement online of student and tutor in real time. The idea of asynchronous tutoring does not require the presence of a student and teacher online at the same time.

Synchronous learning is dependent on the time and the communication takes place in real time, but the teacher and students are in different locations. This type of learning is similar to teaching face-to-face. Both live contacts and synchronous communication allow for immediate feedback and interaction with the teacher/tutor. Synchronous distance education may include multimedia elements, for example chats, simulations and video conferencing. Traditional face-to-face tutoring (synchronous) is based on a contact with a student and a tutor in one room. The e-tutor and the student may be scattered all over the world at the "meeting" of the e-tutoring and they are connected to each other via the internet platform [Finkelstein 2006: 58].

Asynchronous learning refers to learning, in which time plays no matter where anyone can have access to knowledge at any time and as many times as necessary [Rosenberg 2000: 32]. In asynchronous learning "live" elements are missing. Asynchronous learning is not new. The traditional correspondence courses are based on this method.

Today, with the development of technology, asynchronous learning also uses audio and video, and text materials are sent via e-mail or placed on e-learning platforms. Popularity of the Internet and cyberspace gave a new meaning to the asynchronous learning and teaching. Access to the virtual world can engage in discussions and exchange views without any time restrictions. The discussion's materials are provided quickly, cheaply and easily and they can also be edited at any time. Via e-mail, without any problems, you can communicate with the teacher/e-tutor and you can also comment on the forum at any time. Students also have access to many additional resources using links to other sites, simulation and other elements that enrich the learning process [McGreal 2004: 41].

Nowadays tutoring is a method that in response to the market needs is still improved. E-tutoring is a part of this expansion and its takes various forms depending on the technical tools, methods, and both the tutor's and the student's skills training.

2. The role of e-tutor

The traditional school and the teacher's role it plays is different from the interaction in the online environment. The role of the online tutor, according O'Neil, requires a paradigm shift in the perception of time and space, and ability to engage students in virtual communication. The role of the e-tutor requires a whole new range of skills, which result from cyberdynamic of online world [Cox, Clark, Heath, Plumpton 2000: 18].

According to R. Mason and F. Rennie e-tutor's role is to design the curriculum to promote constructive interaction between the participants with the aim of individual and collective commitment to the learning process [Mason, Rennie 2008: 22].

G. Salmon defined the person responsible for the online discussion as an e-moderator. The role of e-moderator is to help students with transition from traditional learning to online environment learning. The role of the teacher, in accordance with the constructivist learning theory, is "the guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage" [King 1993: 32].

By P. Barker e-tutor role is "(...)'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" [Barker 2002: 19].

According to S. Ryan et al, "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" [Ryan, Scott, Freeman, Patel 2000: 110]. According to the authors e-tutor should also has skill to support online collaboration, create an atmosphere of openness and build relationships in the group.

H. Lentell said that "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" [Lentell, 2003: 67]. According to him, the basic duties of an e-tutor is to provide students with assistance in any matter related to personal development, helping students to explore the links between science and other areas of everyday life.

Denis, Watland, Pirotte and Verday attempted to define the e-tutor jobs in seven roles which they considered most important in order to make efficient and effective interaction with students in a virtual environment [Denis, Watland, Pirotte, Verday 2004:10]. Featured by the authors e-tutor's roles are:

1. content facilitator,
2. metacognition facilitator,
3. process facilitator,
4. advisor/counselor,
5. assessor,
6. technologist,
7. resource provider.

Z. L. Berge categorized the tasks necessary to succeed in the e-tutoring and distinguished [Berge 1995: 25]:

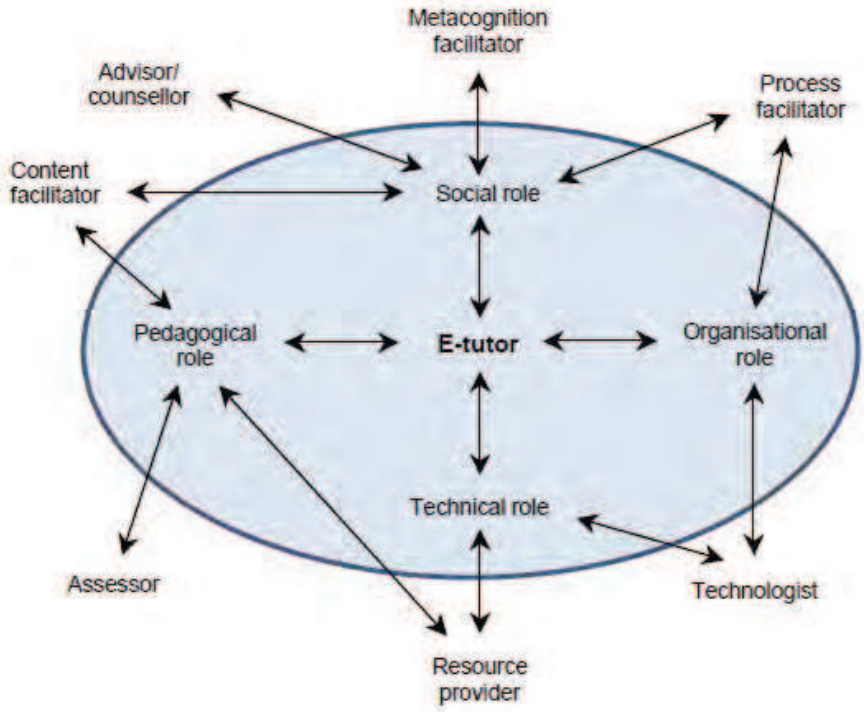
pedagogical role,
social role,
organisational role,
technical role.

Pedagogical role includes operations of enabling students to activities in the online environment and to develop their knowledge and interests. This role of teaching includes modeling appropriate behavior in a virtual environment, the support of students' personal development by fostering creativity, discussions and other forms of innovative activities.

Social role includes creating a friendly atmosphere in a virtual contact, which is essential for effective learning online. In the organisational role the e-tutors oversee the order of discussion in the online environment. They determine its pace, tasks, manage time, summarize the results and close the discussion. E-tutor should also be competent in the field of information technology in order to allow students to develop their competence in a virtual environment with a focus on the substance rather than the technology itself.

Directorate-General for Education and Culture in 2004-2005 developed a model of e-tutoring which takes into account the relationship between the above mentioned roles (Figure 1). No matter how the roles are divided, students have different expectations for e-tutors and their involvement in the online environment [Craig, A. Goold, Coldwell, Mustard 2008: 212].

Figure 1.



Source: A. Goold, J. Coldwell, A. Craig: *An examination of the role of the e-tutor, Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 2010, 26(5), p. 707.

It may be noticed that the e-tutor has many roles in a virtual environment. Individual roles depend on the development of technology and the skills of tutorial participants. They will probably also change with the progress of technology. As suggested

by Bennett and Marsh, e-tutors need "to run before they can walk" and "the majority of the tutors new to online teaching to not have the background of online learning experience upon which to draw" [Bennett, Marsh 2002: 15].

G. Hislop paid attention to the characteristics of an effective e-tutors, such as: motivated, approachable, visible, explicit, pro-active, discrete, collaborative, technically capable and credible [Hislop 2000: 22].

Motivated e-tutors are interested in their tasks, therefore their activity is effective. They are also willing to make the effort to cope with the new technology to use it in learning environment. Approachable e-tutors encourage students to interact with them. Through its openness they reduce barriers with communication in a virtual environment. Visible e-tutors are often present in the online environment, so they can still be in contact with students. E-tutors thanks to an online presence also show its commitment to education which contributes to maintaining effective relationships with students. Explicit e-tutors provide a smooth flow of information and they are responsible for the provision of specific guidance on the activities in the online environment. Pro-active e-tutors reach to all students and motivate them to act in the field of personal development. Discrete e-tutors do not dominate in the classroom encouraging students to be creative and they take care of both the correct formal and informal contacts with the student – they can distinguish "public" and "private" communication. Collaborative e-tutors are willing to work with other e-tutors, exchange experiences with those who are involved in an online education. Technically capable e-tutors have adequate technical knowledge to be able to work freely in the online environment. E-tutors do not have to be experts in the field of computer science, but they should have basic IT skills to be able to focus only on the substantive actions not on any problems with technology. Credible e-tutors are experts for the students in the defined field. The lack of credibility of e-tutor may result in a lack of student's engagement in ongoing activities [Hislop 2000: 22].

To sum up, we can indicate two areas highlighted by O. Simpson in which e-tutor should support the students: "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" [Simpson 2002: 7].

Looking at the roles and responsibility of the e-tutors you will find that there are certain qualities or skills that e-tutor should have to make his actions effective in supporting students' personal development. First of all an effective e-tutor should have organizational skills to be able to effectively keep track of the students, coordinate educational activities and to be in constant contact with students. Chaotic e-tutor will commit many errors which will affect the quality of the contacts and demotivate

students to engage in online dialogue. Essential skill for e-tutor in a virtual environment is also a computer literacy and efficient movement in a virtual environment. Many students may need guidance on the use of online tools. To avoid problems with communication, e-tutor should be sufficiently competent person, in order to solve the on-current problems with information technology. E-tutor should also be friendly and available for their students within the agreed deadlines. Only e-tutor who does not treat students from superior position but is a friend of theirs can rely on effective collaboration and real motivation of students. However, it is important that the tutor has the knowledge and substantive preparation to be the authority for the students. The e-tutor's imagination is also important because of the unpredictable needs of the student during on-line activity which must be confronted and creatively referred to.

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