Chapter 5
Online Tutoring Roles:
Italian Teachers' Professional Development Experience

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ABSTRACT

The chapter presents a case study of a training course involving Italian early-secondary school teachers, which focuses on online tutors' activities and roles. After a brief literature review, it relates the topic to the national e-learning training context, clarifying the tutors' expected tasks within the evaluated teachers' professional training experience. The aim is to analyze the roles played by tutors in the 2.0 learning environment, exploring when, how and why they used synchronous and asynchronous communicative tools and educational resources available on the e-learning platform, as well the kind of support they provided to learners and the relationship they established with them during the training path. The research describes a complex set of online competences and skills which are required of tutors, stressing the key role of the human factor in supporting learners, and identifies factors for improving the design of an effective online tutoring model for adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

For many years the use of new technologies in the education and training sectors has been redefining teaching and learning approaches, showing the impossibility of transferring mechanically the roles and identities handed down by traditional in-classroom situations to technology-based learning environments. The e-learning experiences of teachers and students in various global contexts have shown the importance of developing new professional figures who, transcending the bipolarity between those who transmit knowledge and those who gain it, must possess a set of complex, heterogeneous and multidisciplinary competences and skills with which to manage different online

training activities. In this context, the key role played by the figure of the tutor in 2.0 learning environments (Pardo & Peñalvo, 2008) has been seen as important in supporting learners on the training path towards the achievement of successful learning outcomes. Likewise, it has been emphasized that such technologically mediated learning environments could favor a more active attitude in subjects enrolled on a training path, emphasizing the differences between the concepts of "student" and "learner." The former, typically involved in a formal environment or institution, is expected to obediently follow instructions; is assessed and evaluated in terms of what he/she has learned; moves on through the system to one grade after another; is equipped with packaged knowledge and tools for recording packaged knowledge. On the other hand, the "learner" is in control of his/her learning so he/she can produce and accomplish rather than simply achieve learning; is assessed and evaluated in terms of what he/she can do with what has been learned; is equipped with tools for exploring a networked variety of content, experimenting with that content, discovering and constructing knowledge and drawing conclusions (Warlick, 2010). Thus, the emerging online learner can be described as "someone who has a strong academic self-concept; is competent in the use of online learning technologies, particularly communication and collaborative technologies; understands, values, and engages in social interaction and collaborative learning; possesses strong interpersonal and communication skills; and is self-directed" (Dabbagh, 2007, p. 224).

Lately, lifelong learning and professional development contexts have been widely and increasingly targeted by e-learning initiatives to achieve successful results for workers First, technology-based learning environments are an effective response to the need for updating (reskilling) of the workforce in Europe (Jobring & Svensson, 2010; European Commission, 2012), promoting the acquisition of knowledge and skills for professional and personal development of individuals and their active participation in the knowledge society. Second, e-learning can reduce training costs, ensure widespread access and tailor training content to its users' needs. Third, it offers workers the opportunity to reconcile the continuity of commitment with the upgrading of their skills, because of the greater flexibility it affords.

All the aforesaid e-learning opportunities for lifelong learning find application within the wider scenario of teachers' professional updating. Since the integration of digital media and technologies in education has become a policy priority throughout Europe, in all European Member States the deeper embedding of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teacher training is evident at several levels both in initial teacher education and in continuing professional development (OECD, 2010; UNESCO, 2011). The importance of continuous professional development in the ICT field is one of the priority areas in the first cycle of the Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020, Eurydice, 2011). The key role played by ICT as both a classroom teaching instrument and a mediator in teacher training, has often been seen as an indicator of an innovative educational system.

The chapter presents an evaluation of an Italian teachers' professional development course. Such reported experience is helpful for exploring the key factors related to the involvement of tutors in online learning activities and to the support they provide to learners as well as the relationship established with them during the course. The aim is to reflect on the tutoring roles in training processes involving adult learners, who, as observed by several studies on andragogy (Merriam et al., 2007; Knowles et al., 2011), have particular features and needs: sense of responsibility, previous experiences of training paths, need to learn (often linked to a real necessity to improve life and working conditions) and self-motivation. They also have to master and carry out autonomously personal educational paths, working actively on knowledge without experiencing it (Cercone, 2008). In such

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