

# E-Tutor

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## INTRODUCTION

Many scholars believe that e-tutor support in a virtual learning environment is critical for the success of a student's learning experience. Several reasons support this belief: "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" (Denis, Watland, Pirote, & Verday, 2004).

Notwithstanding, the e-tutor profile is still uncertain and calls for deeper investigation and analysis.

This paper aims to present a framework of competencies for specific e-tutor roles, through a literature review and personal experience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Probably used for the first time in 1997 in online educational programs for American schools, the term e-tutor is now normally used in various countries and contexts. Other expressions currently used in literature to refer to this figure are online tutor, online moderator/e-moderator, distance education tutor, e-teacher, cyber-teacher, online facilitator, and so forth.

What do these expressions stand for? Various authors use these terms with different meanings. While it is emphasized that in distance education the e-tutor intervenes as a "mediator" between the institutions, the course's subject matter, and the students, the term is, however, also used in a wider sense as proposed by Cornelius and Higgison (2000): "We use the term 'tutor' in its broadest sense to include, amongst others, academics, faculty, instructors, corporate trainers, animators, facilitators, moderators, subject specialists and learning support staff. The term online tutor includes any person undertaking a role to support and enable students to learn online effectively".

According to Jaquinot (2002) e-tutoring is a service given to the students in distance learning in order to

make "the signs of presence appear". Laurent, Gagne-Iattoni, and Lessard (1992) describe online tutoring as a wide advising activity, the objective of which is that of breaking isolation. Simpson (2002) and Lentell (2003) stress that the figure of tutor in online learning environments is necessary to make the student overcome isolation.

Among the e-tutor functions Barker (2002) cites pastoral care, while Rayn, Scott, Freeman, and Patel (2000) and Lentell (2003) advocate the facilitator role in the Rogerian sense. In these definitions attention is given to the individualization of the learning program, the support provided in order to overcome learning difficulties, and the importance of this figure in satisfying the relational need that the e-learner may feel.

Other analyses propose to consider e-tutor roles in the framework of the pedagogical model of the course where the e-tutor operates. Berge and Collins (1996) distinguish between three roles: instructor, facilitator or moderator. Briefly, in the role of instructor the e-tutor is more oriented towards support of contents and must be a subject matter expert. As a facilitator the e-tutor is mainly engaged in guiding discussions, providing methodological support and motivating online learners. As a moderator, the e-tutor takes care of managing interactions, discussion groups and online collaborative groups.

Moving from Mason and Kaye (1992), Calvani and Rotta (2000) suggest the analysis of e-tutor roles, considering the methodological model involved in the online course. E-tutors are prevalently experts/trainers in distance courses based on the instructor-centered approach, as in many courses the objective of which is the transmission of learning contents ("content + support" model). They are guides able to value the potentialities of learners in online courses oriented towards the development of practical skills (learner-centered approach, "wrap around" model). E-tutors are "mediators" in a broad sense when applied to a learning group-centered model grounded on collaboration and peer learning as in many courses based on the so-called "integrated"

model (learning-team-centered approach). Compared to instructor or facilitator, the e-tutor moderator/ animator plays a proactive role even if in the context of more advanced courses where students have more control on learning process, his/her role is no longer central, being inclined to operate “back stage” and leaving greater space for interaction between the students (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2003). It is evident that an e-tutor moderator/animator carries out functions of mediation in the management of relational and communication processes. As Berge (1995) specifies, the e-tutor moderator is a central subject in the teaching/learning process and possesses characteristics similar to those of the animator of virtual communities. The same value as Berge’s is given by Salmon (2000), with the term moderator used to mean a tutor—typically distinguished from expert/guide of contents—who stimulates and guides the interaction between a group of students engaged in sharing knowledge and comparing points of views in the virtual learning environment. In both cases, the scenario is one in which participants in the learning community should develop curiosity, accept feedbacks on their own performance, diagnose their learning needs, formulate objectives adequate to their capabilities and aspirations, identify human and experiential resources, and work out a personal or collective project. Such situations would not be sustainable without the support of a specific figure—that is, the e-tutor—able to guide learners and to use appropriate strategies in order to manage such complex educational processes.

Just the same, Trentin (2004) defines the e-tutor as “a professional figure which is not a simple assistant/counsellor, but rather a manager of collaborative learning processes, based on the intensive use of the net” (p. 32). This figure acts mainly in virtual spaces based on computer-mediated communication, and favours network learning processes. The e-tutor therefore is a “tutor of a network of individuals” cooperating to reach a common learning objective and as such is “the propulsion motor of all the network learning processes” (p.34).

## **E-TUTOR ROLES AND FUNCTIONS**

What ideas have emerged from the above analysis? Is it possible to identify a single and coherent e-tutor profile?

First of all, we agree with Daniel et al. (2004) who stress that there are confused ideas regarding the definition of the e-tutor roles. This confusion partly depends on the different expressions used to define the same role/function. For example, the expression e-tutor or e-teacher is often used to indicate a figure that plays the same roles of a facilitator. In other cases, the same expression is used to indicate figures that carry out different roles or functions especially in situations where the expression “online tutor” is used to indicate both an instructor and a facilitator.

Secondly, we agree with the idea that the role and functions of e-tutor depend on the pedagogical model which characterises the course where his/her action is performed. If we generalized, and did not consider the pedagogical model, we would risk making a mistake.

In this chapter, we focus on the functions and competencies of an e-tutor who operates in a learner and/or team-centered pedagogical model, and therefore on functions and competencies of an e-tutor facilitator/moderator.

How can we represent these functions? One of the most renowned analysis goes back to Berge (1995), who proposed a model widely taken up again by subsequent studies (Bocconi & Pozzi, 1999; Rowntree, 1995; Salmon, 2000; Shepherd, 1999; Trentin, 1999). According to this perspective, the four main areas crucial for effective e-tutoring are:

- Technical, assuring the correct functioning of the technical system and helping the participants resolve technical troubles
- Pedagogical, supplying intellectual stimulus, defining the subjects of discussion or activity, offering support for the comprehension of contents
- Managerial, intervening in the procedures and management, and in work planning (e.g. schedules, deadlines, etc.)
- Social, promoting the creation of a cohesive atmosphere of mutual trust within the discussion group, or collaborating in observing and monitoring interpersonal dynamics while trying to solve possible conflicts and misunderstandings

In developing the analysis of Berge, Daniel et al. (2004) propose a more analytical distinction between

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