

Online Tutoring and Mentoring

Antonio Miguel Seoane Pardo

University of Salamanca, Spain

Francisco José García Peñalvo

University of Salamanca, Spain

INTRODUCTION: FROM MYTHOS TO (ONLINE) TUTOR

Man is the only animal that learns for his whole life. Therefore, learning is one of the most important activities of human beings. Information and communication technologies, and specifically the Internet, brought us new ways to communicate, share information and learn. E-learning has become a modality whose capabilities, advantages and potentials is indisputable, but many of the difficulties inherent to learning activities, far from being sorted out by this new modality, have been increased. Loneliness and de-motivation of e-learning users is probably the first cause of failure of online courses.

To avoid this situation, e-learning initiatives must count on an effective human presence. This noted role, held by the professional called online tutor or mentor, find its origins and function many centuries ago, as will be shown.

It is almost impossible to find a field of knowledge or even science whose main concepts or topics were not related to ancient culture and, frequently, to classical mythology. In the next few lines, we will try to develop a definition about online tutoring, coming from its mythological and etymological origins related to *mentor* and the Latin term “monitor” derived from this Greek character.

According to Homer’s *Odyssey*, when Odysseus left Ithaca and was away fighting in the Trojan War, his son Telemachus was just an infant. So Odysseus entrusted Mentor with the care of Telemachus and the entire royal household until he would be back, 20 years later. Although Mentor is not a main character in Homer’s epic poem, he represents wisdom, trust, counsel, teaching, protection, challenge, encourage... (Anderson & Shannon, 1995, p. 25; Carruthers, 1993, p. 9). Mentor’s authority was so important to Telemachus that even the goddess Athena took the figure of Mentor to persuade the hero’s son to search for his father.

The role of Mentor instructing Telemachus is not quite clear in Homer’s poem, and this is one of the most interesting questions about the matter. Nevermind if Mentor (or Athena) is the real “teacher” of Odysseus’ son. It is strange that Mentor is mentioned just a few times in the *Odyssey* and we do not know how he “really” instructed Telemachus. The only important thing is that Telemachus achieves maturity enough to know how to face Penelope’s suitors and help his father to complete the final revenge: he became a man with the help of an old person whose mission was to remain in the dark, “tutoring” Telemachus’ steps, not helping him but following his tracks on a certain distance, because no one can drive the fate of a man except himself. In fact, the undefined, secondary but crucial role of Mentor did not change so much with regard to the excellent “Mentors” of e-learning students from nowadays.

Etymologically, “*mentor*” produces “monitor” in Latin. The verb “*maneo*” (to show, to indicate) comes from the Indoeuropean *man* (to think, to know). So Homer’s character Mentor is an anthropomorphisation of this idea: wisdom (Little, 1990, p. 298), thought, knowledge (and consequently know-how), personified by an old man whose purpose is to transmit this skills.

In the next sections, we will analyze what are the main causes of failure in e-learning initiatives; then, we will try to define the role of the online tutor, his competences and training, as an element of excellence in e-learning courses; finally, we will show a case study based on a lifelong learning diploma for training online tutors at the University of Salamanca, among with a brief conclusion of this article.

FAILURE AND E-LEARNING: THE ABSENCE OF HUMAN FACTOR

Several years have passed from the first experiences with e-learning solutions applied to education and

instruction. However, it seems that e-learning tools and methods do not take off as quality and excellence ways to complement in-classroom training nor quality “distance learning” experiences. This problem is not only applicable to European context, where e-learning history is too short as to break the natural resistance against every novelty, but also to American institutions. Let us illustrate this affirmation with two recent studies regarding e-learning problems.

The General Study of the Internet released in Spain in 2005 (<http://www.egi.es>) shows that 26.4% of Internet users in Spain took at least one online course, but only 56.5% of them declared to be “satisfied” with the training received (Estudio general de Internet, 2005). But not only users are unsatisfied. According to a recent survey, carried out in the U.S. among 109 university and college administrators asked for a candidate to obtain a faculty position (Adams & DeFleur, 2005), 85% of the responders indicated that they had reservations with doctoral degrees earned online. In fact, they had to select a candidate from three applicants whose doctoral degree was obtained in (a) a traditional way and a traditional institution, (b) in a traditional institution but with 50% of degree work online, and (c) in a “virtual university” and 100% online. Results were very clear: 98% chose the candidate with the traditional degree (a).

Therefore, Internet users and university administrators declare altogether that online training does not possess the desired quality to be considered as a good way to obtain qualifications and skills. But what is the opinion of corporations about online training?

According to a study carried out in Spain by Millward Brown for Santillana Formación (Millward Brown, 2006) in order to identify the role of e-learning in corporation training programs and the future training necessities, among other objectives, corporations and public administrations agree with the importance of online training and declare themselves ready to invest in e-learning to train their employees, mainly in blended e-learning solutions. The “ideal” online course for corporations, according to this study, has to own these characteristics: *pedagogically shocking* (appropriate contents, creativity, interactivity, innovative design); *technologically appropriate* (both course and environment are suited to student and corporation technical environment); *acknowledged and rewarded* (the student must be motivated by his company and will be rewarded if he successfully finishes the course); *reinforced with in classroom sessions*; *dynamized and monitored* (tutor’s role is much appreciated).

Bringing discussion into our context, and before defining what is exactly an online tutor and which role will play in an e-learning activity, it is important to consider what is (or rather, what is not) exactly e-learning. It is quite common to associate adjectives like “virtual” or “distance” to “learning,” in order to build synonyms for “e-learning”. But it is important to clarify that we are *not* thinking about virtual learning *or* distance learning when we refer to e-learning, at least not necessarily.

When we try to develop a quality e-learning initiative, the receiving skills and knowledge are easier to demonstrate than in a traditional or in classroom learning context. So if we consider “virtual” as the opposite term of “real,” e-learning is just *real* and not *virtual* learning.

But, from a philosophical point of view, *virtual* is “all that can induce an effect.” If we consider e-learning as something different from many other forms of “learning” because of its active approach, it is clearly “virtual”; that is to say, it has the virtuality to “create” and not only to “assume” knowledge and skills.

With regard to distance learning, it is a common mistake considering e-learning as a form of distance learning, and applying its methods and categories to e-learning the results will be really poor. This is because e-learning is not *non-in classroom* like distance learning is. The actors in this process are present, on a different time and a different place, but their presence is verifiable, and leaves certain tracks. So e-learning is more than distance learning, and this is because of the human presence behind the technology, the net and the computers.

It is also common to hear about the extremely high academic failure in e-learning initiatives. In fact, when this occurs, it could be produced due to any of these four kinds of causes (Seoane, 2005):

- a. Defective development of learning environment, learning contents and/or learning strategies
- b. Shortage of infrastructures, technological culture or logistics
- c. Courses do not fulfil the expectations of students
- d. Absence of human factor monitoring learning paths

Let us detain for a while to analyze the causes derived from this absence of human factor in many e-learning initiatives. In fact, this is probably the most

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