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E-tutor: the project against early school leaving

Who an e-tutor is, what they do and why they are also important in e-learning. An EU project aims to reduce early school leaving with the help of e-tutors

Tutors have always accompanied traditional in-house teaching staff to provide adequate support to students. Using their knowledge and skills in a specific area, they are able to support pupils and workers outside school or training courses, guiding them on their learning path and accompanying them with educational interventions.

In recent decades, the use of computers, mobile phones and Internet-connected media, which are considered indispensable technology in everyday life, has made it necessary to review the means of education as well. As a result, education activity has also been conditioned by the Net, which has led to the creation of another way of training the new generation, where the traditional teaching method has been flanked by new technologies. Thus, many schools and training centres began to make use of **e-learning**, distance learning, which users can access from anywhere and at any time.

This necessarily led to the creation of new figures, with appropriate skills, both from the training point of view and from the point of view of the new technological systems: thus, the e-tutor was born, with tasks of coordination and development of online and face-to-face learning.

Who is the tutor?

Tutoring refers to all **educational interventions** accompanying and supporting traditional learning, which are carried out in parallel with school or work activities. The tutor, in general, is the person who mediates between the learner and the teacher in the school or the teacher giving a training course, because he or she has the possibility of relating directly to the learners and grasping their needs, in order to develop their skills and support their educational growth. The tutor also encourages the **assimilation of content** by the learners, through methods customised to the needs and abilities of the learner, and verifies the progress in the learning of knowledge, possibly favouring its reinforcement. The purpose of tutoring is to facilitate the learning process of its learners, in order to improve the effectiveness of traditional training.

The figure of the tutor originated in school systems, to guide students to choose between the different educational options that were presented to them. Then, its role expanded to that of training support for those pupils who need more guidance than the traditional one, relegating tutoring to an extra-curricular activity. The tutor may decide to teach individual students, small groups of people, and address middle school, high school, university and college students. But that is not all. The figure of the tutor can also be very important in the **world of work**, where he or she can be useful in ensuring the worker's integration and professional development.

Tutors are an important point of reference for students and workers who want to deal with problems of learning, orientation or motivation in the various areas of social experience. In recent years, this figure has become increasingly popular, also at a private level, to resolve situations of learning difficulties or social hardship.

Objectives and functions

The ultimate goal of e-tutors and tutors is to bring the student to an adequate awareness of his or her own abilities and to a certain degree of independence in coping with the learning process. Therefore, the main function of these figures is to **support students** in their training, helping them to find the method best suited to them to achieve the best results. To achieve this, there are several objectives to be pursued from time to time:

- Facilitating the **enhancement** of the student's abilities;
- Orient and guide pupils' **choices**;
- To lead school drop-outs to recover the motivation they need to regain confidence and a desire to learn;

- Preventing and reducing loss of **motivation** and dropping out of school;
- Lead the student to achieve maximum **results**, while respecting and making the most of his or her resources and time;
- Mediate between the **student's needs** and the demands and objectives of the training sites.

The activities carried out by the tutor, linked to the main function of guiding and supporting the student, include conducting private lessons, to review the topics explained in class and clarify doubts, to check the student's improvements and to understand their difficulties. In addition, it is good for the tutor to be able to develop alternative approaches to the traditional ones, using different techniques and tools, in order to find the most appropriate method to enhance the student's abilities.

In addition to the main role, the tutor also performs the functions of guidance and reception, help with school credit management, monitoring, verification and evaluation. Moreover, the support provided by a tutor may not be purely technical and educational: he or she may also act as a guide for relational aspects of the student.

Competences

A tutor, in order to perform his or her functions properly, must possess certain competences. First of all, he or she must have excellent knowledge of the subject he or she teaches and, in the case of e-tutors, also of software and technology, so as to be able to explain even the most complex concepts effectively. Fundamental are also methodological and didactic skills, which enable the tutor to adequately follow his or her students during both face-to-face and online lessons. In order to adapt to the needs of individual learners, creative skills and flexibility may be useful: these would allow new solutions to be developed to make learning more effective and enhance the individual learner's abilities.

A good tutor should also possess good **organisational skills**, which include researching useful materials for lesson preparation and student learning and the ability to alternate between study activities and exercises to put the knowledge learned into practice. Finally, it is good for the tutor to have excellent **communication skills**, enabling him/her to convey the concepts of the subjects taught, and interpersonal skills, necessary for working in a varied and multicultural environment. Patience, listening skills and sensitivity are useful skills to put the student at ease and understand his or her needs and requirements.

The tutor in e-learning

With the development of new technologies and distance learning modes, the tutor has proved to be a useful figure also in the field of e-learning. In this field, in addition to the skills and functions typical of a traditional tutor, skills linked to the use of the Net are required. The e-tutor, in addition to the traditional function, can have several roles:

- Instructor, i.e. subject matter expert, able to support the student in the learning process. In this case, the e-tutor's main competences are those related to content;
- Facilitator, when he/she supports the student throughout the learning process, so that he/she acquires the necessary skills to complete his/her training, using the Web as a tool for in-depth study.
- Moderator, when he/she manages group activities, in which learning takes place mainly through discussion among the various members;
- Technician, when offering support in the use of the tools made available and used during e-learning.

As regards the **e-tutor's competences**, apart from the more traditional ones, there may be others, which vary according to the tasks. There are three main areas of competence of an e-learning course tutor:

- Technical skills, which include the ability to use the platform and the technological tools made available to the students, to support them in their use;
- Facilitation skills, of a methodological and psychological nature, necessary to bring out the students' abilities and to help them achieve the set results in a more effective and engaging way;
- Management skills, useful for monitoring students' progress and managing group dynamics.

E-tutor against early school leaving

One of the goals of e-tutoring is to **reduce school drop-out** by supporting individual students in choosing their future and expressing their abilities, chasing away lack of motivation and minimising the risk of dropping out. According to the OECD,

between 20 and 50 per cent of European students do not complete their higher education. To combat the risk of dropping out of school, the European Union has developed a **project**, funded by Erasmus+. The **E-tutoring project** was created with the aim of reducing school drop-out rates, through the development of a set of tools and a tutoring system, in which traditional learning support is combined with new digital technologies.

The objectives of the EU project are several:

- Reducing the drop-out rate by developing new training tools and combining the use of social networks, career guidance and classic tutoring. The project enables students and e-tutors to have an "innovative social platform they can use every day to solve problems, learn from each other, share key information, make decisions, plan their studies and future career goals".
- The creation of an innovative European digital system, available to universities and schools of higher education and suitable for different contexts. To this end, a mobile application was also introduced to provide students with useful tools and devices during their studies;
- The active involvement of high schools, to 'bridge the gap between education and career'. For this, career guidance will be an important and strategic feature to enable students to develop their skills, also with a view to a working future, and to help them cope with school difficulties;
- The provision of useful tools to high schools, to improve the quality of the academic offer, also in relation to career guidance. The project also aims to structure an international quality tutoring system.

The role of the e-tutor, in recent years, has demonstrated its potential in the field of learning and support for students, to enable them to achieve good results, enhance their skills, and orient themselves in the educational and professional context.

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