

# Tutoring in distance education

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BARBARA CLASS\*

## TUTORING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

### Action and developmental research

The research carried out for this PhD thesis is basically a research action in the sense that acting as a tutor in the past two years for successively three groups of learners (approximately 80 students) we have experienced that being a tutor in a distant education course is highly time consuming and can become demotivating. The aim was thus to develop a tutorial structure support that should alleviate the tutor to keep him/her motivated and efficient for the learner. Developing both conceptual and practical tools to obtain a tutorial structure matching with our pedagogical practices gave this action research a component of developmental research (Van der Maren 1999, Charlier 1998).

### State of the art

If plenty of literature exists on presential tutoring it is not the same for distance tutoring. What you can find concerning distant tutoring are local analysis of specific experiences. The professional profile of a distant tutor as well as the institutional support structure the tutor is going to act in are totally open questions. The first task was thus to identify variables from documented local experiences and the second to organise them in a sensible way.

### Theories underlying the tutorial model we developed

Once various variables had been identified, we developed a tutorial model based on three theories:

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- the helpdesk structure taking into account four categories of actors:
  - the first front composed of tutors who will tutor learners;
  - the second front composed of super-tutors who will provide help for tutors when needed, coach novice tutors and suggest possible innovation trends according to what happens on the field;
  - the third front composed of content provider who will answer tutors' content questions and adapt activities and content according to the feedback from the field;
  - an independent, observing front composed of the tutor manager who will be in charge of observing what goes on in the field and will act proactively.
- a knowledge management system whose objectives are to capitalise what will be done with one group of learners and recycle some of this work to generate new knowledge using the material with a posterior group of learners. The model is largely inspired from Probst & al. (2000).
- a constructivist learning philosophy since learners will be placed in the center in a situation of research and production with help and feedback provided at each step.

The model itself

The model itself consists in five modules reviewing:

- 1) the tutors' roles,
- 2) tools and institutional support structure to serve the tutor,
- 3) tutor training,
- 4) human resources organisation and finally,
- 5) capitalisation and knowledge management.

## The situation we are going to implement

Modules from the developed model	Analysis of the MA we are tutoring in
Tutor's role	Identify two categories of tutors: a referent tutor who will follow the learner's evolution from the beginning to the end and a tutor whose roles will vary between animator, social relationship, content expert and evaluator. Both categories of tutors will be composed of the same persons who will thus support two tutorial duties.
Tools and institutional support structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Chat for formal and informal communication</li> <li>– Forum for formal communication related to content and organisation</li> <li>– Calendar to remind deadlines</li> <li>– Pager for informal spontaneous communication</li> <li>– Wiki for collaborative writing</li> <li>– Helpdesk to group questions related to tutoring (tool only accessible to tutors, super-tutors and tutor manager)</li> <li>– Special areas dedicated to stock learners' productions in order to reuse them in a cycle of knowledge management</li> <li>– Tutorial support structure specifically with the introduction of the tutor manager role</li> </ul>
Tutor training	<p>Modality: complete distant basis</p> <p>Content:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) technical training to the platform used. Special attention will be given to scenarios of possible uses for a tutor</li> <li>2) pedagogical training on learning models and strategies, collaborative learning and tutoring</li> <li>3) «clinical supervision» (Bennett &amp; Marsh 2002) that consists in an exchange of practices among tutors</li> </ol>
Human resources organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– tutor manager, super-tutors, tutors, content providers according to the above previous paragraph.</li> <li>– learners who must be briefed about the pedagogical system they are in which places the learner at the center in a situation of production</li> <li>– the coordinator who has a federative role to achieve the MA's goals</li> <li>– a technical helpdesk</li> </ul>
Capitalisation and knowledge management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) from the content point of view, valorisation and recycling of learners productions and interactions</li> <li>2) from the tutorial practices point of view, knowledge capitalisation using the helpdeks structure</li> </ol>

## Conclusion

With these parameters we are going to observe various variables: quality of learners' productions, quality and quantity of recyclable knowledge produced, transfer, satisfaction of both learners and tutors. The idea being that a tutor with a high feeling of self-efficacy will produce and have his/her learners produce high quality interactions and productions whereas a tutor with a poor feeling of self-efficacy will not produce this but will assure an acceptable tutoring thanks to the support structure (Bandura 1997, Gibson & Dembo 1984).

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