

Chapter 8

Teachers or tutors?

From educational Taylorisation to pedagogical creativity

Authors and tutors

DL systems usually use the term tutor instead of teacher or professor. Many of the functions developed by a teacher in face-to-face education can be divided into at least two different roles: the role of the author and the tutor.

The author –or very frequently, the authors– is the one in charge of preparing the contents of a course. That is why some call them “contentidista” (content-compiler) (Campos, 2002). Tutors, on the other hand, are in charge of providing direct support to student learning. In packed courses these two roles also correspond to different moments: authorship corresponds to the stage of production, and tuition to the course’s running.

Other roles can be added, both for authorship and tuition. For example, many DL systems have a course director or coordinator. Usually their main role is more on the authorship side. They are in charge of coordinating different authors and the multidisciplinary production team (the four musketeers of Chapter 4 and many others that can be necessary, according to the type of production). Sometimes it is better to divide the direction of authors (or “content-compilers”) from the operational coordination of the team.

Directors may also assume the coordination of the running phase or at least take part in the training of tutors. But other people can be in charge of coordination during this stage. In tuition there are also other roles, such as that of “monitoring” (Döding, 2003). Their main function is to support students, not while learning contents but rather in the operational aspects of DL systems and the technologies involved, by solving the problems they may come across in this area. They can also offer support to tutors themselves in this sense.

Although there are several variations, we could say that there will be two big types of roles:

Production	Running
Director – Coordinator	Monitor
Author/s	Tutor/s

According to this scheme, students will have a direct relationship with tutors and monitors and an indirect one with directors and authors. The last two will provide them with the design and the “texts” but they cannot interact with them.

This scheme has several important advantages. For example, it enables renowned teachers to contribute with their knowledge in a course that will be taught to many people. They would not be able to teach so many students, but they can indeed prepare –with the support of the multidisciplinary team– some of the materials for the course. Tutors will be in charge of supporting students in the learning process by specialising in this kind of support and “relieving” them from their concerns about contents.

However, this task division also has some disadvantages. On the one hand, it keeps the author away from students and their learning processes. So it may happen that the author’s contribution is brilliant from the conceptual point of view, but not so much from the pedagogical perspective. The multidisciplinary team can solve this in part.

This system also disconnects the tutor from the design and production processes. The tutor may feel –and actually it is often the case– like a simple “executor” of a course that others designed and an executor of what others have planned. The more packed a course is, the more they feel like that.

This “Taylorisation” of teaching, where some plan and others execute, may not be very motivating and may even discourage good teachers from working as tutors since in DL they feel they lose their position. Some because they feel “their place” was mainly passing on knowledge; others because they feel that there is not much margin for creativity, or because instead of having a personalised way of learning and an adaptation to each group situation, this kind of work standardises teachers’ and students’ activity.

That is why many DL systems have reconsidered this adamant division between authorship and tuition. And they simply begin to recover the idea of the “teacher”: that is, someone who has the ability to both transfer contents –but also

to suggest good readings by different authors, of course– and to aid learning. Many authors get involved in tuition and many tutors in authorship. Or effective exchange instances are established.

In too massive courses, it is more frequent to have a disconnection between these two roles. As many authors will be required, it is possible that not all of them are able to take part in authorship. A good and motivating solution for tutors are production models with “holes” that can be filled in by tutors’ own ideas –or at least with materials they selected–, in accordance with their knowledge of the groups and the people they are working with, of their learning processes and knowledge acquisition. They will further include the production of knowledge by their students in this process and eventually they will share them with the rest.

That is, a good tutor will be, above all, a good teacher: a facilitator of learning and not only a mere transmitter of contents (cfr. Maggio, 2000). Even simpler: a tutor *is* a teacher. It is worth insisting on this. Therefore, from now on, I will use both terms together or indistinctively.

The tasks of the tutor/teacher

How many students can a tutor manage? It depends on the kind of course, but, on average we could say that the same number a teacher is able to handle well in a face-to-face course. This may vary between twenty-five and fifty students per tutor according to the different institutions and systems. In fact, experience indicates that in good distance learning courses the tutor has even more work than in face-to-face courses because students may demand greater personalised attention. Therefore, to handle a group with two weekly hours of class, the tutor must have eight hours.

What tasks are usually done by tutors? It depends a lot on the type of course, the extent to which it is “packed” and the openness or closeness of materials. The less packed and the more open a course is, the more tasks the tutor will have. For example:

- Organising activities. Reminding students of pending tasks.
- Organising groups and promoting exchanges among them.
- Designing and suggesting activities that are not included in the materials.

- Suggesting readings or additional activities (to all students or some of them).
- Answering questions, doubts, enquiries.
- Running debates in forums, with questions, challenges and summaries.
- Organising and coordinating face-to-face meetings.
- Assessing and commenting on students' work.

In more packed systems with less open materials, tutors tend to concentrate on answering questions and assessing papers (and sometimes not even this, which is handed over to coordinators). NICTs added the idea of promoting other kinds of interaction, not only between each student and the tutor but amongst students, for example, in forums, chats or mailing lists. However, the recovery of groups and the combinations with attendance had already begun.

Answering questions, running debates, managing group work and face-to-face sessions are particularly important tasks which I will analyse more deeply.

Good questions and better answers

There are several types of questions and many ways to answer them. The kind of questions that want to be elicited and the kind of answer the teacher provides can be decisive in learning processes.

I have already dealt with questions posed by teachers and based on the material or tuition in Chapter 6. Now I want to consider students' questions.

Students' questions may show, for example:

- Lack of reading, work or attention.
- Lack of prior training.
- Lack of information or comprehension problems.
- Search for conceptual links (for example: between one content and a previous one).
- Search for links to experiences, practice, professionals, etc.
- Disagreements with the point of view of the material or the tutor.

What do you tend to do as a teacher when you face each of these situations?

Of course there is no single way to answer to all the cases. But some general criteria may be of help:

- *Our answer should always encourage learning and not discourage it.* For example, if the question shows lack of reading, sheer recrimination (“you do not seem to have read enough”) cannot always be helpful. Without ignoring this fault, we should think about how to really stimulate reading and express how useful it can be. You should also bear in mind that you do not have enough time to read when you are playing the role of the student... “I know it is hard to do all readings, but there are some which are particularly handy. For example, text X can help you understand better this problem”.
- *Appreciate good questions.* Let the student know that and share the question with the others if possible. Learning is most of all built upon good questions and not only the already given answers to non-posed questions. To stimulate doubt methodically also helps stimulate learning. He who does not doubt, does not make himself questions, does not learn.

Questions that look for connections are particularly enriching since they allow to draw up conceptual maps and guides to actions. They can be conceptual links. “Is this related to...?” or “What is the relationship between this and that...?” There could be connections between experience and practice “How can this be applied to this situation...?” or “Is this what happens when...?”

This kind of questions is what the own teacher proposes. Take a look, for example, at this case from the previous chapter:

What relationship do you see between “closed material” (Chapter 3) and “packed” course? Could there be open materials in a packed course?

Even a student could have posed these questions, although in a different way: “*Is packed the same as closed?*” Even you as a reader might have asked yourself this question when the term “packed” first appeared.

Questions that show some disagreement with what materials or the tutor says are also very good. Unfortunately, only a few students dare to ask these questions. If they come up, then it means there is educational health. Repressing or censoring them does not seem healthy.

We are now going to consider the case of typical questions, those which show comprehension difficulties or lack of information. What can a teacher do when faced with this kind of questions?

Answer, one could say. Provide a direct and straight-to-the-point answer to the question posed. No doubt it is the simplest thing to do and sometimes the best thing; particularly, when it concerns about information that had not been given so far. It is not so clear when the question shows comprehension problems. Some other possibilities may be better or supplementary. Instead of or in addition to “answering”, we can:¹

- *Explain the grounds* of the answer. Take advantage of the question to find the answer in a larger conceptual network.
- *Analyse the question*. Explain the constructive ideas that support it. Use it to explain the conceptual conflict implied in the answer. Re-asking the question by making another one that is broader in scope.
- *Compare questions* or stimulate students to do so by *organising* them according to useful categories in order to articulate a group of related concepts or procedures. For example: questions such as: what?, why?, what for?, how?...
- *Throw the question back to the student or the group*. In this case, we can also compare answers later and offer our own answer as well. This may “avoid” some of the conceptual confusions that may exist, which tend to persist a lot, even after a long piece of work, since they are the result of long-standing preconceived ideas. Or it may be a good chance to show that there is no single possible answer, since the subject is controversial or the problem accepts several solutions. In order to suggest strategies to search for answers in an autonomous way, it is advisable to suggest additional readings or activities.

It is true that not answering and throwing back the question to students is sometimes the strategy used by teachers who do not know the answer, and find themselves caught unarmed by a student’s question. Distance work, when it is asynchronous, allows to hide that since there is time to look for the required answer or clear up a doubt one may have. Nevertheless, it can be more honest and pedagogically saner to admit one’s ignorance or share one’s doubts. This could be done by committing oneself to look for answers and bring them back later but also encouraging the group to do their own research.

| 1 I mainly follow Maggio’s suggestions on this issue (2000:43).

As it may be seen, there are several ways to ask and several ways to answer. We suggest the following activity:

- Choose some unit from the distance learning course you have already worked with, or a classroom-based lesson if you have not yet work at a distance.
- Write down the most frequent *questions* students make and group them according to what they try to say.
- Classify the *answers* according to the categories you established and see what other type of answer could have been possible.

It is a good practice to develop with other colleagues: compare types of questions and answers and discuss the teaching strategies that could be derived from them.

Promoting exchanges and debates

The possibility of exchange “among everybody” offered by NICTs is one of the most appealing features to be adopted by DL. However, we usually receive complaints that forums do not work or are rather poor.

One of the reasons appears to be technological. In the case of chats, it is also frequent that when there are too many participants there appears some sort of frustration because no coherent dialogue can be established: when somebody answers to somebody else’s intervention, a new one already appears, and so on... Forums do not have this inconvenience and they allow to put an order to the debate. However, they usually require being online, which may be a serious barrier to many students. Mailing lists may avoid these problems and adapt better to many people’s IT habits; they do not have such order, though. The search for Web-like solutions offline can be an appropriate way to solve both problems (cfr. López, 2004). In all cases, tutors may help students handle technologies and stimulate their use, etc.

Another possible explanation of forums’ scarce or poor usage is of a pedagogical sort. Here is where course design and the work done by the tutor teacher are decisive. It is not usually enough to invite students to participate in forums,

it is necessary to organise them well and promote them with questions and motivating activities.

Some systems resort to the idea of compulsory components and thus participation in forums is part of students' assessment.² I believe this may be appropriate if the question or task proposed is really interesting and collective. If it can be substituted by an individual task or if it is like "come to the board and answer each question in front of the class", I think it goes against the pedagogical approach we developed throughout this book.

We are going to look at some interesting activities for collective interaction spaces, such as forums, lists or chats.

- Make students' *constructive ideas*³ explicit. This is useful before presenting the course's proposal on a certain subject. It will then allow to go on discussing ideas and confront them with the ones offered by materials and/or the tutor. One can easily promote an exchange by asking "what do you understand by...?" Or if it is a procedural concern, "what do you do to...?"
- *Discussing* different positions regarding a subject. To do so controversial issues could be presented. Or else, previous individual or group work can be organised with students; each of them must take one position and find arguments to support it, even if they do not share it. This allows to go over the arguments in favour or against a particular issue.
- *Discussing cases or problems* that may be suggested by tutors or by participants themselves. Discussing concrete situations may be more motivating than talking about an abstract topic and it allows to put in practice several theoretical or methodological tools.
- *Sharing knowledge and experiences*. This is particularly important in the case of adults who are already working. Learning communities are formed around the exchange of knowledge among their members and not only with what comes from the outside. Stimulating this exchange and critically appreciating one's and others' experience will be helpful beyond the specific educational environment.

Going back to technological aspects, multi-point videoconference⁴ could be

2 This is the case with several of SENA's courses in Colombia, according to what I was told by the people in charge.

3 For further information, see Chapters 3 and 5. See also Kaplún, 2004 and 2005.

4 I mean videoconferences in which several groups from diverse places participate, all of them with the chance of interacting with the others.

used as a main or complementary means in a distance learning course and work as a space for debate if it is correctly used. Having group work at every place that is connected would be useful to do so, though it is necessary to have local tutors. Group work can also be done offline, thus saving costs.

It could be a good idea to combine individual student exchanges with exchanges between small course groups. For groups to contribute to the debate, it will be necessary that someone acts as a spokesperson and shares a summary of the work done collectively.

Encouraging group and face-to-face activities

I have already dealt with the issue of forming small groups in Chapter 6 and I will refer to that now. It should be enough to say that both group formation and permanence highly depend on the tutors' work. When forming the group, they must help to do so in the most appropriate way and with clear tasks. For the group's permanence, they can help them to face and solve the conflicts and hurdles every group goes through, both in its internal dynamics and its task. Without sound tutorial support, groups run the risk of dissolving or becoming frustrating spaces where no progress is made in the task.

Right from the start and throughout this book I have referred to face-to-face meetings and their convenience. During a face-to-face meeting many things can be done, according to the work stage and group needs:

- Knowing students' expectations, their interests, realities and previous ideas.
- Meeting all members of the group, "becoming" a group as such, will facilitate future relationships at a distance.
- Making working teams (which can continue to work as such).
- Doing work that requires equipment students do not have or cannot learn to operate at a distance (for example manual tasks).
- Clearing up doubts, discussing conflicts or differences, finding solutions.
- Contacting experts on the course's topic (teachers and others), being able to listen to them, asking them and debating with them.
- Sharing experiences and knowledge among participants, starting debates that will be followed at a distance.
- Evaluating the course's development; assessing the course collectively.

- Sharing and assessing products and results of individual and group work.

In order for any of these tasks to be done, it is necessary to have some previous organisation and a coordination that does not lose sight of the objectives and that is also attentive to what comes up in that moment. Apart from being a good chance for other experts to participate, coordination will mainly be a task done by tutors or a general course coordination that is very linked to tutors.

Tutorial teams, training and teachers' distrust

Stimulating student group work should go side by side with teacher team work. At least we should provide spaces where we could share working styles, problems and ways to solve them, materials and assessments about the courses' development. In order to do so, forums or mailing lists can be created and regular face-to-face meetings can be called.

Another interesting possibility is *tutorial classrooms*, where tutors of a particular course or different courses work with their groups on a computer, by phone or in person.⁵ There, other formal and informal exchanges can take place and some common problems that may arise can be solved together. An expert coordination may support tutors and their on-the-job training itself. It frees the tutor from having his own IT equipment (and its maintenance and connection) and it establishes a clear timetable for his work, something many tutors appreciate.

These spaces may, in addition, be ideal for specific tutor training activities. Tutor training is, above all, pedagogical training, which good teachers have supposedly already received. But it is usually necessary to supplement it with specific tools for distance learning work and the use of the corresponding technology. In the same way as students often need an introduction to the work in virtual environments, teachers will also need it.

It is true that many teachers cannot adapt or reject this kind of work. This has sometimes led to looking for tutors among people with little training or teaching experience but who are more willing to work at a distance and with NICTs. However, I want to insist on the point that if the tutor is a teacher with no training or pedagogical experience, results can be pretty risky.

| 5 A working method that was adopted, for example, by SENA in Bogotá.

It is also said that “traditional” teachers (face-to-face courses) cannot adapt to a situation where their main role is not to transmit knowledge. As I see it, this is not a problem of being face-to-face or at a distance, using a whiteboard or a computer, but rather an issue of the *pedagogical approach*. E-learning can also be approached as a means to transfer knowledge, as I mentioned in Chapter 3. When I say that a good tutor is a good teacher, I mean, once again, a teacher that regards himself mainly as a facilitator of learning.

Of course there are long-existing technophobes, people who do not trust computers or any sort of technology. Or people who simply cannot adapt to them. It is also true that some “*techno-euphoric*” discourses which announce educational revolutions after the sheer appearance of computers are also suspicious.⁶

I think that many teachers’ suspicion regarding e-learning is not so much directed to technologies but rather to reducing their roles to “*course executors*”, as I have explained here. If they are indeed reduced to this role –as it happens in some systems–, their suspicion will be justified.

Other reasons which may lead teachers to have doubts about DL with NICTs are the following:

- *Work overload*. Longer preparation time –if they are involved in authorship activities– and attention to students, who may call them at any time or fill their inbox with e-mails. And, in general, time to adapt to the new educational method.
- *Extra costs*. Usually they must take up the costs of their equipment, its maintenance and connection. It is like hiring a messenger with his own scooter but without realising he must maintain and recoup the cost of the vehicle, fill the tank, etc.

Both things can be solved with *extra payments* which can make up for time and expenses. But then teachers of face-to-face courses in the same institution may be upset with that measure, since they do not understand such difference. “They work without moving from home and they even get paid more...”

A tutorial classroom or at least working with the institution’s equipment at its premises may help to solve some of these problems. But in any case, they must be anticipated as part of the institutional resistance to such a big change as this one.

| 6 For further information see Kaplún, 2001a.

Finally, we have to be careful about the possible *cheating and frauds*. Traditional distance learning systems have a history of tutors who are supposed to pay a visit to groups and never do so, consultancy hours which are never respected, etc. With tele-working it can still be worse. If a tutor never answers questions or runs debates, it can be harder to detect it.

LMS platforms allow to verify the amount and connection time of tutors and even supervise their interaction with students. But this may cause unrest among tutors, so we should be careful about the way in which these resources are used, so that they can be taken as support rather than surveillance. It is also true that they cannot account for telephone and personal queries.

When faced with possible non-compliances, it will be required to make due controls; students do this in part when they are given the opportunity to assess tutors; and coordinators, monitors, etc. do so as well. But, above all, it will be necessary to insist on motivation and training. Bad teachers of face-to-face courses also “cheat”: they are often absent, they do not prepare their lessons properly, they are hardly ever available for queries, etc. If a good tutor is a good teacher, then it is true that a bad teacher is usually a bad tutor. And no one is safe from bad teachers...

Most likely, the less Taylorised tuition work is and the more chances there are for creativity, the more tutor teachers will be involved and committed to their work.