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# The tutor's roles and functions in online education. Qualitative study within the context of worker training

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## Abstract

E-learning education has become a reality that transcends the educational environment. This research focused on continuous education of working people for whom e-learning offers many advantages given the characteristics of this group. The tutoring process is key when introducing improvements and contributing to the progress of this educational experience. The research here presented was intended to analyze the functions performed by teletutors in carrying out their educational function, highlighting e-learning tutoring styles. The methodology employed was qualitative, and in-depth interviews with tutors of 29 online courses were conducted. The data were gathered within the framework of a program of continuous training courses for autonomous workers from small and medium-sized companies.

The analyses performed allowed for in-depth study of the dimensions and functions performed by tutors in the educational activity. The Atlas.ti software was used for qualitative analysis that allowed for the construction of several category systems relating to a series of comprehensive theoretical frameworks. Several flow charts were drawn for each one of these theoretical frameworks that allowed for a better understanding of the relationships between the categories and dimensions of each tutor participating in the study. It was also possible to establish tutor typologies according to their roles and functions, the resources used in tutoring and the features that characterize students that participate in e-learning.

*Keywords:* E-learning; Tutor e-learning; E-learning tutoring; Qualitative research.

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## 1. Introduction

E-learning is gaining ground among the different forms of training, not only because it is efficient, but also as a result of the proliferation of a multitude of studies intended to improve the teaching and learning process (i.e. Llorente, 2006).

In the present changing and dynamic situation in which we find ourselves, brought about by the introduction of information and communication technologies into the educational process, the methods, strategies and instruments used in teaching must be reconsidered, since there are indicators showing that the social and work-related educational experience that bears upon an individual's development will not be one and the same throughout life, that there will be various work-related changes and that this is one of the typical and basic goals of adult education and advancement.

E-learning is currently the most frequently used training mode for continuous education of workers due to the great advantages offered. Notwithstanding, we must not think that this educational mode ensures by itself greater quality or faster and more efficient learning. With this pedagogical model the tutor's work acquires special importance to the detriment of the use of information and communication technologies.

The tutor does not transmit content in the manner he or she did by classroom teaching due to the fact that the student is already in possession of content that is to be acquired in the student's own manner and at his or her own pace.

The research presented here adopted a double perspective based on two closely related aspects: on the one hand, the introduction of new educational technologies as a relevant and current aspect, and on the other, the need to improve e-learning quality in worker training.

Accordingly, we became aware of the need to study tutoring forms that contribute and aid in improving performance by the teletutor and which have an impact on the development of an improved teaching-learning process that results in lowering student attrition rate.

The paper presented is part of a wider research effort intended to contribute to the work still to be done in order to improve the quality of the formative action that takes place in this area of education. In doing so, we began by analyzing which functions are carried out by e-learning tutors through the educational actions they undertake and how these functions are perceived by students.

The proposal put forward by Llorente (2005), regarding five functions that all teletutors must perform was the basis and has been used as the theoretical model for our research. These five functions are:

- Academic Function: Relating to mastery of contents, activities, and student formative assessment, as well as the skills to organize activities.
- Technical Function: Intended to ensure student mastery over available tools on the virtual environment.
- Guiding Function: Having the required skills to plan, structure and establish operating rules, as well as to program schedules and implement the various formative actions.
- Social Function: Meant to overcome feelings of isolation, loss or lack of motivation of students participating in this educational mode.
- Organizational Function: Relating to the tasks of providing students guidance and advice on organizational matters in the course of the formative actions.

## 2. Objectives

The general research objectives established were the following:

- To gain an understanding on tutors' perception in regard to educational course online tutoring and to analyze the different manners in which tutoring is conceived.
- To gather information on which of the functions and tasks of online tutoring were of greater importance in the tutors' opinion.