

The role of the tutor in the university context and in distance learning: an exploratory research

Rosa Vegliante^a, Katia Sannicandro^{b,1}

^aUniversity of Salerno – Salerno (Italy)

^bUniversity of Modena and Reggio Emilia – Reggio Emilia (Italy)

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Abstract

The contribution focuses on the role of the tutor in online courses also in relationship to recent Italian regulation Ministerial Decree n. 6/2019 (“Auto-evaluation, evaluation, initial and periodic accreditation of the venues and courses of study”), that has introduced concrete indications on the presence of tutors in distance learning courses. In the first part, the study examines the evolution and skills of the tutor, with relation to the international debate on the spreading of distance learning. The second part concerns an exploratory survey conducted with the aim of collect the opinions and satisfaction levels of instructors and tutors on the tools used to monitor learning and support students in online courses (MOOCs) on EduOpen portal (<https://learn.eduopen.org/>). The need to strengthen and rethink the role of the tutor (greater professional recognition) has increased, particularly in the context of distance learning; in many cases the tutor is the main interlocutor of the students and as a support figure for the team of instructors is at the core of processes of didactic innovation.

KEYWORDS: e-tutor, MOOCs, Digital Education, Distance Learning, Learning Analytics.

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1. Introduction

In the Italian university context - also in relation to development and evolution of “blended” mode courses (degree courses, courses of higher education, etc.) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) - the role of the tutor has changed significantly over the last few years. The recent Ministerial Decree (M.D.) n. 6/2019 - “Auto-evaluation, evaluation, initial and periodic accreditation of the venues and courses of study” introduced specifications regarding the presence of tutors in distance learning courses. The professional figures indicated in the decree are:

- “disciplinary tutors, who carry out their activities in virtual classes;

- tutor of the degree course, who have functions of orientation and monitoring;
- technical tutors, whose roles are in technical support” (M.D. n.6/2019, p.15).

For the disciplinary tutors and tutor of the degree course, the M.D. explicitly requires of a degree akin with the Academic Fields (Academic discipline) the course in which they will operate (for other details in the Italian context: <https://www.miur.gov.it/settori-concorsuali-e-settori-scientifico-disciplinari> and <https://www.cun.it/documentazione/academic-fields-and-disciplines-list/>).

The presence of the tutor is therefore perceived by the normative as a *central* element for the design and management of online courses, direct impact on quality requirements and indicators (M.D. n.6/2019).

In Table 1 we have tried to associate the technical requirements and quality indicators (M.D. n.6/2019) with the tasks and responsibilities of the tutor’s role.

The *quality* of didactic interaction is directly connected to the design of e-tivities. In relation to this aspect Packham and colleagues (2006, based on McVay-Lynch, 2002) proposal five actions/activities conducted by tutors in the presence that can be “replicated” even

¹ corresponding author - email: katia.sannicandro@unimore.it

Other technical requisites for periodic accreditation of distance learning courses		Tutor's activities
	Actions planned (summary)	
Didactic interaction and formative assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop guidelines to facilitate didactic interaction - involving instructors and tutors in assessment processes 	Design of e-tivities and assessment; support in the management of group work (face-to-face and remote); management of communication with students.
Staff qualification and provision of didactic materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify technologies/methodologies alternative to "learning in situation" and adapted to substitute face-to-face relations 	Integrate the use of innovative teaching methodology for promotes and encourages students' active participation (e.g. problem-based learning, team-based learning, etc.); support in the design of accessible didactic resources.
Assessment of the students' learning level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Methods and use of remote assessment examinations 	Design of self-assessment and formative evaluation tests; management of formative feedback and instructional scaffolding; support in the management of open badges.
System integration	Organization of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - e-learning teaching and administrative services - university IT services - information resources (university library) and other services of the university system 	Support in the management of activities guidance to students; technological devices and app management; and support in online services accessibility management.
Quality of the didactic interaction	Promote different learning styles and teaching methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improve students' motivation by creating a social context for collaborative learning-promoting the active role of students [...] 	Management of analytic learning systems and predictive tools

Table 1 - Quality requirements related to the provision of online courses of study (M.D. n.6/2019) and possible actions of support offered by the tutor.

in digital learning environments. The five actions include: the classroom discussions, role-playing, case studies, exercises based on questions and answers and online evaluation. Consequently, are also required disciplinary and evaluation skills, in addition to the skills associated with the design/re-design didactic stage.

The need to strengthen and rethink the role of the tutor (greater professional recognition) has increased, particularly in the context of distance learning (Halverson et al., 2019; Youde, 2020); in many cases the tutor is the main interlocutor of the students and as a support figure for the team of instructors is at the core of processes of didactic innovation. Beginning with this composite framework, in the first part, the study examines the evolution and skills of the tutor, with relation to the international debate on the spreading of distance learning. The second part concerns an exploratory survey conducted with the aim of collect the opinions and satisfaction levels of instructors and

tutors on the tools used to monitor learning and support students in online courses (MOOCs) on EduOpen portal (<https://learn.eduopen.org/>).

2. Theoretical Framework. Evolution of the tutor/e-tutor figure

To trace the profile of the e-tutor, it is necessary to consider the plurality of learning environments and, consequently, the substantial redefinition of methods, models and cognitive and communicative styles that characterize the disparate formative processes in which this new figure is involved. According to Italian law, therefore, the legitimacy and enhancement of tutoring has shifted from training in disciplinary knowledge to practical-operational knowledge. Similarly, the tutor accompanies and supports the learner, using tools and means that strengthen his role and invite reflection. In the relationship with the tutor, the students can self-

regulate their learning, submit to analysis of the procedures adopted and consolidate/develop metacognitive strategies and self-assessment in an active and participatory way.

From this perspective, the function of the online tutor becomes decisive in the cognitive management practices of a social nature, such as collaborative and/or cooperative activities. In this context, the term “collaborative” refers to group work based on reciprocity and oriented to the achievement of a shared goal, and the term “cooperative” refers to a way of working in which the positive interdependence between members of the community is central (Strijbos et al., 2001; Meijer et al., 2020). The sharing of a digital space can favor interactions and communicative exchanges; in this context, technology acts as a collector of links between users, who, united by the same aims and interests, benefit from multimedia resources and interconnected practices (Alessandrini, 2016). In the virtual classroom, there are external spaces that unfold on the web, establishing a dynamic continuity between “contest of education, contest of work and professional contest of life” (Galliani & Notti, 2014, our translation). If we relate the different learning environments with the educational strategies adopted, we can distinguish three macro-categories: web-based training (centred on structured content); supported online learning (interaction with the tutor and peers is dominant) and informal e-Learning (learning opportunities in spontaneous groups) (Rotta & Ranieri, 2005; Trincherò, 2014). From the fusion of web-based training and supported online learning has emerged an integrated model of e-Learning (Galliani & Notti, 2014) that combines collaborative practices and individual and/or tutor-assisted knowledge management. It is a model that, referring in particular to the one proposed by Galliani (2014), combines two apparently divergent levels, “technological-communicative” and “pedagogical-didactic”, and expresses its potential in the interactions between the different contexts (formal, informal and non-formal). At the pedagogical-didactic level, traditional tutoring is generally associated with the practices of the tutor that support the learner in the teaching-learning process.

2.1 Online tutor

An online tutor, while retaining the traits that characterize the tutoring in presence, also brings the effective use of technological devices. Online tutorship involves the development of a set of skills that are linked to “a chameleon, whose true essence is the degree of flexibility and adaptability to the contexts, situations, users and phases of the course” (Tassalini, 2006, p. 234). Collins and Berge (1996) portray this figure as having three roles: moderator, instructor and facilitator. Shepherd (1999) defines the e-tutor as an expert in synchronous and asynchronous

communication, making a distinction between coach, in the sense of moderator, evaluator and content expert. Aggregating these various definitions, the e-tutor figure emerges as a key professional in online learning, allowing the transition from a teaching-learning style centred on the role of the instructor to a model that not only enhances the value of the student but also promotes collaborative learning and motivation; empowers students and emphasizes different perspectives. Online tutoring is not just an extension of in-person tutoring; depending on the specificity of the activities to be carried out, the tutor may play the role of e-teacher if he/she prepares the disciplinary contents, the role of e-moderator if he/she manages the communicative-relational dynamics and the role of technical tutor if he/she monitors and tracks the activity of users. In this way, there is continuous and personalized reinforcement typical of cognitive scaffolding.

In reconstructing the formative-didactic scenario of the e-tutor, three specific competences are identified, ascribable to the following macro-categories: socio-communications, moderation and technology (Galliani, 2014). Cognitive scaffolding is associated with emotional scaffolding (as a regulator of relational processes), which are both enriched by technological support through the management of the digital didactic resources present in virtual environments. The technological support function, which determines the role of course design, the help desk and the facilitator, is mainly covered in the initial phase and is reduced over the evolution of the formative path due to onset of the social function, in terms of cognitive facilitation, animation and observation. The latter function unfolds during the entire course and concerns the management of communication and interaction. The conceptual-pedagogical function is important, aimed at the growth of the individual and the group and promoting the constant search for solutions to emerging problems, so as to increase the dialogue between the actors involved in the virtual community. The organizational-structural function, that takes place even before the start of the course, is decisive and consists of the idea that the learning model, starting from an analysis of user needs, defines the objectives and the methodological and assessment choices. This function is associated with the evaluation function that accompanies the design phases and is included, to all intents and purposes, in the training path; it is used before the start of the activities in order to plan deadlines and organize work, during the course to monitor students’ progress and at the end of the activities to analyze discussions in forums and chats and to assess the quality of learning.

Particular attention should be paid to evaluation competence which requires:

- observation of the user and appropriate communication technologies to monitor the

training course;

- analysis of the data obtained from observations to help build a picture of meaning with respect to the actions taken; and
- judging the value of both the training path (evaluation) and the learning path (assessment).

E-tutoring is characterized by a set of activities aimed at supporting an individual or group in a virtual environment during a teaching-learning process.

From this perspective, it requires the implementation of a strategy that connects theory with practice and an e-tutor who is able to act as a mediator in individualized and collaborative learning. The mediation function (technology-learner) and its facilitation, carried out by the e-tutor when facing tasks that require a considerable cognitive load (management of information, content, messages of a metacognitive and interactive nature), is the element most appreciated by users and creates conditions for the formative success of students (Phirangee et al., 2016). In this respect, the role assumed by the e-tutor is decisive for learning purposes (Hrastinski, 2008; Chae & Shin, 2016) and can be measured by comparing the objectives and the learning outcomes (Mapolisa, 2012).

With regard to the participation of students, a study on styles of tutorship conducted by Vanin and Castelli (2009), allows a distinction to be made between sporadic (cluster) presence and regular (distributed) presence, based on the effectiveness of communication in online environments. The analysis confirms the value added by a non-intrusive and supportive e-tutor. Moreover, during the focal part of the course, the presence of the e-tutor greatly decreases the physical distance that exists within an online course (Richardson et al., 2015), reducing that sense of isolation typical of distance learning (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006). This is confirmed in the literature by studies that show how perceived proximity between the student and the e-tutor promotes better learning outcomes (Hew, 2015; Mattana, 2014). For this reason, the social and didactic presence of the e-tutor is essential, because the students' involvement (or the cognitive commitment required in the activities) carries out a preventative function with regard to online abandonment. VanLehn's analysis (2011), for example, identifies eight actions that bring together both modes of intervention aimed at training success: diagnostic evaluations, assignment of customized tasks, tutorial strategies, monitoring of user communication, knowledge domain support, feedback and scaffolding. Martin et al. (2018) adopt as a theoretical framework the categorization of Berge (1995), who breaks down online tutoring into four areas: managerial, technical, pedagogical and social. In this case, the descriptive analysis also reports how important timely feedback is for emerging problems (i.e., responding in a short time frame) and how introducing an online path through

videos helps to unite the four categories of tutorship. In academic courses, where there is an alternation between online and face-to-face learning, both e-tutoring and peer tutoring are strategic teaching methods that encourage students' involvement and motivation to learn. Moreover, if e-tutoring is not included in academic curricula as an integral part of structured pathways, students may perceive its role as marginal, thereby reducing participation in online activities (Copaci & Rusu, 2015). The function of the e-tutor as a cognitive, affective and technological scaffolder is therefore confirmed. The pedagogical function is enriched by the social function, making, for example, a space of learning favorable to interaction, in which the different actors work to achieve the training objectives. In this task we recognize the abilities of the e-tutor to be on par with an instructor in the following areas: creating the right conditions for directing the flow of communication, monitoring conversations to support learners in teaching practices, and managing the evaluation of processes and products.

3. Methods

In the field of distance learning, the professional figure of the online tutor is open to rethinking the skills they possess. This entails a break with the label of "tutor" and an overlap in many cases with the role of co-instructor. In these cases, it supports the instructor in the creation of formative contents as video lessons and e-activities, in monitoring the formative and evaluation processes; or in managing the complex organization of interactive activities.

It is evident how a "hybridization" of different roles, competences and professional skills is underway, even in "open" training contexts; just think of the spread of MOOCs in recent years (De Metz & Bezuidenhout, 2018) an example of which is represented by the EduOpen Portal. EduOpen (<https://learn.eduopen.org/>) is a project funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research for an extraordinary intervention under art. 11 of the Ministerial Decree of 4 November n.815 (distribution of the Ordinary Fund), aimed at creating a platform for the delivery of courses defined as MOOCs by a network of Italian universities and selected partners. The EduOpen portal is active since April 21, 2016, currently over 300 courses have been activated, with over 82,000 students enrolled.

The instructors of the courses on EduOpen also manage in many cases the tutoring activities present in the MOOCs, if provided by the course delivery method - the EduOpen MOOCs provide two modes of use self-paced and tutoring - so in many cases the two figures coincide (instructor and tutor). It is important to have data and information on their opinion and experience, both for the development and design of new tools and

to investigate the reasons for using Learning Analytic (LA).

Because of this complex background a first survey has been constructed through the delivery of a questionnaire directed to MOOCs instructors of the EduOpen Portal.

The contribution presents first analysis of the data that emerged regarding some tools adopted to monitor learning and usable by tutors and instructors in the online course. The (short) online and anonymous questionnaire are composed of 7 questions, 1 of which is open-ended and 6 close-ended (using a 5-levels scale: 1- Strongly Disagree; 2- Disagree; 3- Undecided; 4- Agree; 5-Strongly Agree). 34 instructors with active courses on the EduOpen portal answered the survey. The analysis focuses on the most relevant aspects to the aims of the contribution.

4. Results and Discussion

The first question asked in the survey to the instructors is related to the delivery mode of their course (self-paced or tutored). The tutoring actions (if scheduled) are organized along a calendar shared with the participants and the presence and duration of the “online tutoring activities” can change for each MOOC. The teachers declared that 50% (17) of the courses are delivered in self-paced mode and 50% (17) in tutoring mode. The mode can influence the instructor’s methodological and design decisions, and consequently also the outcome of the students’ learning processes, it is therefore a variable to be considered.

In question 2 we have asked the instructors to give us their opinion on the usefulness of the available monitoring tools and their user-friendliness. 70.3% of the instructors (sum of scores 4 and 5 on the scale) give a positive opinion on the usefulness of the tools and 74.1% (sum of scores 4 and 5 on the scale) on user-friendliness. Many EduOpen tools enable instructors and tutors to monitoring students’ progress and participation in courses (for example progress bar, check for completion/visualizations, dashboards, etc.). Not all tools are known or used by the instructors, for example, tools for the analysis of course completion or drop-out, number of enrolled and logs, examination of scores in the assessment tests, etc.

In question 3 “The data on the EduOpen portal about courses the student is enrolled in, courses he has completed, certificates and badges, are sufficient for the student to monitor his/her learning activities?” 57.6% of the instructors (sum of scores 4 and 5 on the scale) give a positive opinion regarding the presence of data reported by the system and related to courses the student is enrolled in, courses he has completed, certificates and badges, etc. This aspect, related to the

need to develop and strengthen systems to support students’ learning processes, is fundamental to improving the competitiveness of a university’s educational offering, both in terms of expanding online and higher education curricula (Paul et al., 2019). It is no coincidence that in the Italian university context - also due to the didactic innovation implemented by many universities (Cecconi, 2017; Felisatti & Serbati, 2018) and the greater spread of e-Learning and MOOCs in recent years - the role of the tutor is constantly changing (the aforementioned legislation represents an example). The need has emerged for concrete support to instructors for the complex construction and didactic design of university courses (McVay-Lynch, 2002; Salguero & Gómez, 2013; Tait, 2019) intended for both face-to-face and distance learning contexts.

In question 4 “The data on the EduOpen portal about number of participants, course completion, assessment reports, are sufficient for the instructor to monitor the didactic activities in their course” 63.6% of the instructors (sum of scores 4 and 5 on the scale) give a positive opinion although 25% points out critical issues related to “user-friendliness”.

In question 5 “How useful would you think to have the following data on the course you proposed on EduOpen” were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each item using a 5-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) on the aspects listed in Table 2. The aspects of greatest interest indicated by the instructors are (sum of scores 4 and 5 on the scale): average time spent by students in the course (91.1%), average time needed to complete the course (88.2%), scores of the activities carried out by each student (90.9%), students’ “favorite” activities (82.3%).

In question 6 “The importance you attach to the different types of data for a fast-tracking of your students’ activities in the platform” (using a 5-point scale from 1 to 5) is mostly related to the graphics (94%) and numerical data (85%).

What is the potential of these systems and technologies? An analysis of the literature reveals a variety of perspectives and studies, for example, in Baker’s (2016) research, which is also related to the spread of MOOCs and LA systems. We find systems that can provide student support at every stage of the learning process, systems that can talk to students with natural language, systems that model complex pedagogical strategies and systems that recognize students’ emotions and respond on the basis of these differences. Despite this wealth of possibilities, there are also criticalities related to “a disconnect between the vision of what intelligent tutoring systems could be” (Baker, 2016, p. 601). We are also witnessing the transition to systems and tools capable of providing reports and analysis of the “status” of students (completion of individual activities, levels of inactivity,

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Q5	1		2		3		4		5	
number of students' accesses to the platform in a given period of time	5,88%	2	2,94%	1	11,76%	4	50,00%	17	29,41%	10
average time spent by students in the course	2,94%	1	0,00%	0	5,88%	2	67,65%	23	23,53%	8
average time needed to complete the course (acquisition of the attendance certificate)	0,00%	0	2,94%	1	8,82%	3	64,71%	22	23,53%	8
average time spent in carrying out defined activities (video lectures, group work, assessments)	0,00%	0	11,76%	4	11,76%	4	38,24%	13	38,24%	13
average of the activities completed by students within the course	0,00%	0	2,94%	1	20,59%	7	47,06%	16	29,41%	10
delays in the delivery of tasks, evaluation tests etc.	0,00%	0	9,38%	3	31,25%	10	43,75%	14	15,63%	5
warnings and reminders regarding deadlines (deliveries, evaluations, meetings, etc.)	0,00%	0	18,18%	6	33,33%	11	33,33%	11	15,15%	5
number of artifacts produced and tasks performed	0,00%	0	12,90%	4	12,90%	4	38,71%	12	35,48%	11
evaluations of the activities carried out by each student	0,00%	0	3,03%	1	6,06%	2	42,42%	14	48,48%	16
descriptive statistics on the scores achieved by the student and the group	0,00%	0	15,63%	5	6,25%	2	37,50%	12	40,63%	13
students' "favorite" activities	0,00%	0	2,94%	1	14,71%	5	47,06%	16	35,29%	12
number of social interactions (messages in forums, messages posted, participation in discussion and work groups)	0,00%	0	14,71%	5	14,71%	5	47,06%	16	23,53%	8
types of social interactions (messages in forums, messages sent, participation in discussion groups and work)	3,03%	1	9,09%	3	27,27%	9	33,33%	11	27,27%	9
search tools to select groups of students with similar characteristics	2,94%	1	5,88%	2	32,35%	11	38,24%	13	20,59%	7
comparison of data collected in similar courses	0,00%	0	8,82%	3	35,29%	12	29,41%	10	26,47%	9
user profile	5,88%	2	5,88%	2	26,47%	9	38,24%	13	23,53%	8

Table 2 - Q5 "How useful would you think it would be to have the following data on the course you have proposed on EduOpen".

	1	2	3	4	5
numerical data	0,0%	0,0%	14,7%	38,2%	47,1%
graphics	0,0%	2,9%	2,9%	47,1%	47,1%
images/icones	0,0%	15,2%	36,4%	33,3%	15,2%
descriptive texts	0,0%	19,4%	29,0%	35,5%	16,1%

Table 3 - Q3 "The importance you attach to the different types of data for a fast-tracking of your students' activities in the platform".

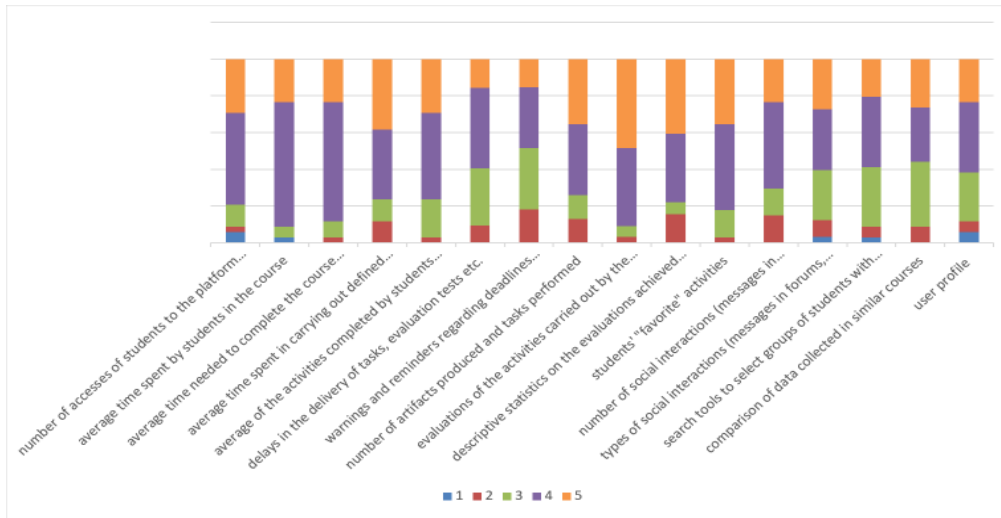


Figure 1- Q5 “How useful would you think it would be to have the following data on the course you have proposed on EduOpen”

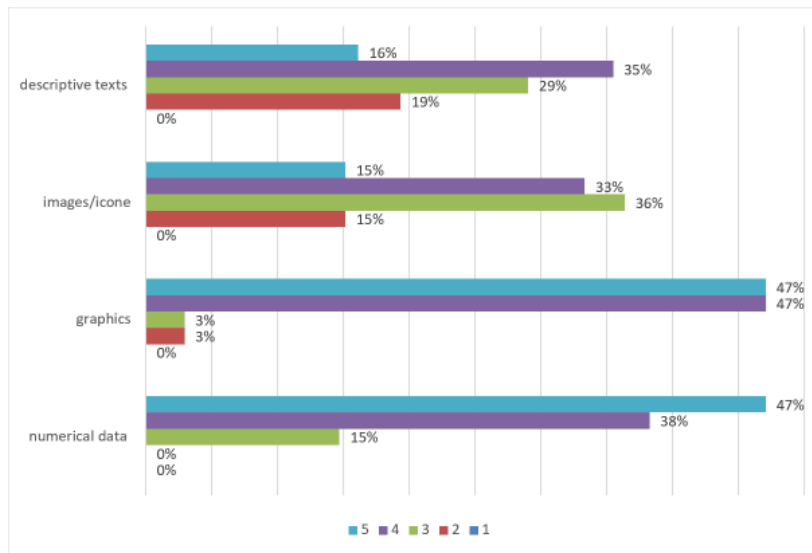


Figure 2 - Q6 “The importance you attach to the different types of data for a fast-tracking of your students' activities in the platform”

drop-out rates, etc.). Some examples can be identified, such as the system developed by Zogotech (Figure 4), or the one offered by Intelliboard (Figure 3 and 5).

Because of the support and presence of online tutors, intelligent tutoring systems will not only monitor or collect data, but will also be able to integrate the resources and tools offered by LA systems. The diffusion of online learning systems is linked to development and hybridization processes of online environments and the quality of the designs themselves (Inventado & Scupelli, 2015).

In accordance with by Rebecca Ferguson (2014) students will be researching "support" from Learning

Analytics from outside the VLE or LMS, being involved to a greater extent in open educational or blended learning. This will require a shift to more stimulating data sets and their more challenging combinations, including data from mobile devices, biometric and sentiment analysis (for example, resources and tools for sentiment analysis can be useful for avoiding the error of “profiling a learner without taking into account the emotional aspects that may hinder his progress” - Suero Montero & Suhonen, 2014, and consequently have an incomplete view of the learning experience).

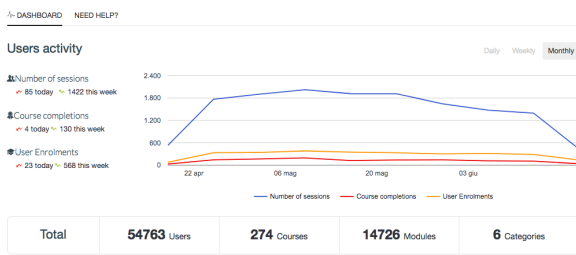


Figure 3 - Example of an LA system dashboard used by EduOpen.

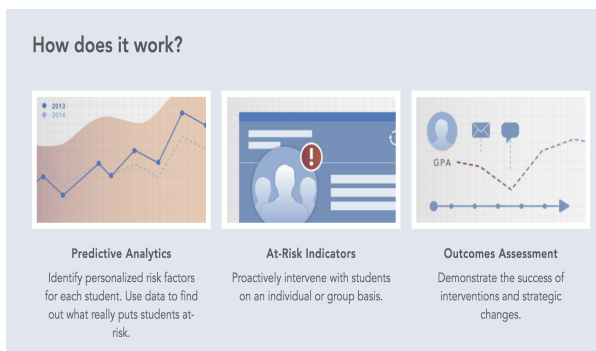


Figure 4 - Zogotech: examples of instruments. <https://www.zogotech.com/>

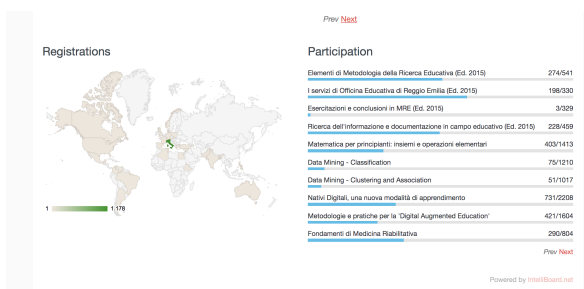


Figure 5 - Intelliboard: LA system used by EduOpen <https://intelliboard.net/>

Therefore, the presence of key figures - such as the tutor - will be crucial to create a “bridge” between different learning environments. Learners with their perceptions, expectations, learning objectives and professional growth are the focal point from which to develop tutoring systems, focusing on variables related to “motivation, trust, fun, satisfaction and correspondence with career goals” (Ferguson, 2014, p. 145).

In fact, there is also an increase in the expectations that students have with respect to their online learning experience (Wright, 2015). Student satisfaction levels of learning pathways are often linked to enrolment and dropout rates, so the tutor (particularly in the university context) will have to work within the four dimensions related to these aspects: “Interaction with the teachers;

interaction with course content (and design); interaction with the peer group; and interaction with the system” (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006, p. 301-303).

In the proposal of Bouhnik and Marcus (2006) the last dimension is frequently excluded from the influence of the instructor and consequently excluded from the process of redesign of courses (intended as revision and improvement of instructional design), but thanks to the support of the tutor this element can be part of the process of redesign and innovation of didactics, also in the university context.

5. Conclusions and future developments

If we consider the complexity of the processes and actions described with respect to the instructional design of the courses (online and face-to-face), the constant growth of the distance learning and the recent hybridizations between MOOCs and Higher Education courses, we can conclude that the figure of the tutor “expand” its importance in the complex process of didactic innovation taking place in the Italian university context. Also in relation to monitoring and support actions for process of learning that require defined didactic actions with respect to levels of participation and interaction or drop-out rates in distance learning contexts.

The survey was useful to understand possible solutions, critical issues and to formulate hypotheses for future research. Future research perspectives should include the development and co-design of LA tools, which may be useful to overcome some of the critical issues that have been identified (Baneres et al., 2016; Caballé & Conesa, 2018; Salmon & Asgari, 2019).

The aim of this research was to present an analysis of the significant change in the role of the tutor and the importance of his “presence” to promote didactic innovation processes.

It is therefore not only a question of collecting data on the learning and teaching processes in online environments, but also of engaging in a reflection on the possibilities offered by digital tools and resources to promote a greater use of e-tivities, evaluation methodologies with instant feedback, strategies of “gamification as an incentive scheme in order to motivate students to practice more frequently and increase their engagement in the learning experience” (Baneres et al., 2016, p. 108).

Notes

The article is the result of a common vision among the authors with the following responsibilities: Rosa Vegliante is the author of the paragraphs 2 and 2.1;

Katia Sannicandro is the author of paragraphs 3 and 4. Both the authors together wrote the paragraphs 1 and 5.

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