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facilitators of virtual learning

1.2 Study Text

Role and function of virtual facilitators in online courses

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Role and function of virtual facilitators in online courses

The tendency to assume that face-to-face trainers can simply transfer skills to new roles as online facilitators (e-tutor, e-trainer, e-moderator) was shown to be wrong both by research and by established best practices. Therefore, preparing virtual learning facilitators is an important mission due to the complexity of competencies and characteristics involved.

The role of the virtual learning facilitator requires specific competencies, including those associated with managing online groups, interaction, and communication – a topic with distinct dynamics and characteristics.

The management of online interaction takes on a significant role, as it is a core variable for creating learning communities. This calls for diversifying the types of remote interaction, considering not only trainee-content and facilitator-trainee interactions, but also trainee-trainee interactions and trainee-interfaces interaction (platforms).

The facilitator must act in a social learning context, which requires mobilizing a series of pedagogical, didactic, organizational, and management instruments. It also requires managing interactions that go from being one-to-one towards one-to-many and many-to-many.

It is certain that the role of the facilitator is expanded, diversified, and complexified, in a way that often leads to changes in their status within the organization. Thus, acting as facilitator, mediator, and learning guide, are part of this role, which is achieved both by interaction with individuals and with the group.

The role of the online training facilitator becomes more complex and more prominent compared to what it was in prior generations of distance learning. And particularly so given the current diversity of programs and courses, requiring of the facilitator distinct intervention models (cf. Theme 1 of this Module).

Online facilitation requires specific competences and skills, including technical skills and even special personal characteristics. Although there are many aspects that are common both to face-to-face learning and to conventional distance learning, one cannot assume that pedagogical competences and approaches of these modalities

are automatically transferable to the current online environment: adaptations are necessary. As Salmon (2000: 2) states,

"e-moderating is not a set of skills any of us is born with, nor something we learned vicariously through observing teachers whilst we ourselves were learning".

Acquiring these skills presupposes "the immersion of the facilitator" (Salmon, 2000: 4) in this environment and, therefore, training in an online context. In addition, there are some specific online teaching skills that need to be acquired or developed.

In this regard, this expert proposes a very comprehensive synthesis of tutoring skills in a virtual context, combining two sets of variables.

First, the Characteristics:

- Understanding of the Online Process,
- Technical Skills,
- Online Communication Skills,
- Content Mastery,
- Personal Traits.

Second, the Qualities: Trust; Constructive Spirit; Ability to Foster Development; Talent for Facilitation; Ability for Knowledge Sharing; and Creativity.

These skills are acquired through training and experience. For Salmon, the online facilitator does not have to be a content expert, nor know or master complex pedagogical and didactic techniques. Facilitators do not require "a long string of qualifications, nor many years of experience. Nor do they need to be experts or gurus in the subject" (Salmon, 2000: 41).

In this regard, the facilitator would be distant from the status of classroom teachers. She suggests that "they need a qualification at least at the same level and in the same topic" as the topic they are facilitating (ibid.). This perspective of the facilitator as a technical role, who does not require deep and specialized knowledge of the contents and pedagogical instruments, has been strongly criticized by several academics.

For instance, Anderson and his colleagues (2001), commenting on Salmon's perspective, write: "We believe that such minimal subject level competency provides less than the ideal that defines high quality professional education" (id.: 9). Garrison &

Anderson (2003) also strongly oppose this understanding of the online facilitator. They write about this as «guide on the side», since it amounts to suggesting "an artificial separation of facilitator and content expert and speaks to the potential distortion of an educational experience that has become pathologically focused on student-centredness to the exclusion of the influence of a pedagogical and content expert in the form of a teacher" (id.: 70). According to them, this approach to the role and functions of the facilitator in the online context ends up being based on a misunderstanding: "such a laissez-faire approach misinterprets the collaborative-constructivist approach to learning and the importance of systematically building learning outcomes (ie, scaffolding) to achieve intended, higher-order learning outcomes" (ibid.). Both consider that, to achieve training objectives that involve the development of complex skills/competences and high-level learning (as is typical in certain fields of knowledge) it is necessary to act, by structuring, guiding, and monitoring the teaching-learning process.

However, three aspects are relevant in the analysis of Salmon's proposal. Firstly, the number, diversity, and complexity of the skills and competences of a virtual learning facilitator, as she states, demand a high level of personal, intellectual, and cultural aspects. This greatly dilutes the idea that the facilitator will be "yet another" member of the learning community, on equal terms with everyone else.

Secondly, although Salmon argues that when selecting facilitators, they only need to have reasonable technical skills (able to use digital technologies and online networks efficiently), alongside online empathy and flexibility, and willingness to receive training, it is true that she assumes previous training in this field (online facilitation) and about one year of work experience in this role (a kind of on-the-job training). Only then will those skills and competences are expected to have been developed (Salmon, 2000).

Finally, this model seems suitable for training contexts that do not require complex academic certification requirements. Examples of such complex requirements include degrees in higher education, or some situations of personal, professional and technical training, which aim towards in-depth knowledge and competences, starting from an already considerable background on the part of the participants.

Martin et al. (2019) identified the role and function of the facilitators in terms of the phases in which a course or program is. These are identified through a survey of these functions among trainees who attended the courses/programs, thus raising the possibility of these functions and roles being performed by the same individual. This situation naturally depends on the institutional models developed for online training in which they are framed: facilitator, course designer; course manager; content expert, or mentor:

• the role of facilitator, with an emphasis on the importance of its the online "presence" manifested by evidence of its interaction and contact (messages, feedback, etc.) so that the trainee feels the presence of the facilitator, supporting one's learning, sharing its knowledge, clarifying doubts, becoming a role model for trainees (e.g., Martin et al., 2019);

• the role of course designer, responsible for defining objectives and learning strategies, which depends on the kind of institution involved, for it can be played by several different actors (instructional designers, editors, technology specialists, teachers, among others);

• the role of course manager, associated with providing the content, assessment, and encouraging students to overcome their difficulties.

• the role of content expert, demonstrating one's competence regarding the content and the instructional design, connecting them with practice and real life.

• the role of mentor, which is not limited to teaching, but also to advising students on their academic and professional development (Martin et al., 2019).

The importance of training for online facilitators, so that they can respond to the various roles, skills, and competences required by ever more complex online training contexts, is a relevant aspect to address their growth and rapid evolution. But also, a relevant aspect to develop high quality online training.

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