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Tutorial Action as a Resource to Improve Higher Education

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Abstract: This article describes a qualitative study, and it focuses on the analysis of the dynamics surrounding tutorial action in higher education. The authors have tried to determine the specific needs of the students by identifying and examining the functions associated with tutorial action. Several action guidelines aimed at improving tutorial function are proposed.

Resumen: Este manuscrito describe un estudio cualitativo y se enfoca en el análisis de las dinámicas que rodean la acción de tutoría en educación superior. Hemos tratado de determinar las necesidades específicas de estudiantes a través de la identificación y el examen de las funciones asociadas con la acción de tutoría. Varias líneas de acción cuyo objetivo es el de mejorar la función de tutoría se proponen.

Keywords: *European Space for Higher Education; resource; teaching quality; tutorial function; higher education; mentoring*

A series of external and internal circumstances surrounding university life emphasize the importance of the professor's role as a tutor. Among them, we may highlight the phenomenon of globalization and the overall presence of communication and information technologies. The consequences of these phenomena have been studied by Race (1998) and Fielden (2001), who supported the need for a change in higher education planning. This requires an assessment of tutorial action in higher education. In the coming European setting, tutorial support in higher education promises to be an excellent resource to improve the quality of university teaching, as long as it is acknowledged as an exceptional, complementary element in the integral training of students.

In his search for an integral development of university students, Caple (1996) claimed that the student learning process is the meeting point of the voices of teaching and guidance and tutorial action. Therefore, the author approached learning from the perspective of the students' performances (Guskin, 1994). The American College Personnel Association (1994) stressed that the key to enhancing learning and personal development is to create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside the classroom. Kuh (1996) provided a synthesis of the conditions that encourage students'

learning and that enhance the significance of their university experience through the connection of academic learning with the lives of students outside the classroom setting.

For such a purpose, a qualitative study aimed at determining the specific needs of students and at defining action patterns or guidelines for the improvement of tutorial action in our Faculty of Education Sciences was conducted. This enabled a more personalized academic follow-up of our students while at the same time ensuring them adequate tutorial support concerning particular problems and enhancing their decision-making skills. Tutorial action appears as a tool that makes it possible for students to design their own curriculum as a means to improve their academic performances and that prepares them to make their first decisions regarding their professional future and their initial access to the labor market.

With the aim of solving the problems associated with the referred research, we defined an initial set of specific objectives that were later readjusted as required in the course of the research process. The convergence of these objectives with our object of study helped us to delimit, understand, and direct our research. The main set of objectives, which served as the backbone of the study, was as follows:

- Determining the time devoted by the professors of the Faculty of Education Sciences to tutorial functions and assessing their professional commitment to such functions.
- Establishing the use made by students of tutorials and the ways in which tutorials contribute to their overall education.
- Identifying students' needs regarding tutorial support and their specific demands on it.
- Describing the weaknesses and obstacles identified by students when attending tutorials.

Participants

The described research was conducted during the 2004-2005 academic year using the interview as the main data-collection technique, and it involved the participation of 45 students who acted as "key informants." All of them were students in their third year of obtaining a degree in social education organized by the Faculty of Education Sciences of the Spanish University of Vigo. The selection of the students was based on their higher knowledge and experience on university tutorials. Their participation, however, was voluntary, and personal anonymity was guaranteed.

Most students involved in the research were women (43). This coincides with the almost total predominance of women in teaching-associated degrees in Spanish universities. The ages of the participants ranged between 20 to 25 (40) and 26 to 30 (5).

Method

As already explained in previous sections, our research was conducted from a naturalist, descriptive-interpretative approach. We studied reality in its natural context,

trying to make sense of the observed facts based on the meaning they have for the involved persons (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As Huber (2003) claimed, this approach provides a deep understanding of the researched situation in natural contexts. Therefore, in the studied situation, we combined description and interpretation strategies with the use of comparison methods.

The selected research design enabled us to conduct an intensive study in which the interview technique was used as the main data collection tool.

Data were collected for several months within the first semester (September to February) of the 2004-2005 academic year. The interviews with the students were conducted on a personalized and informal way, which provided valuable information concerning their experiences. The complete content of each interview was recorded on audiotape with the prior consent of the student.

The research was initially presented in a formal speech made in the classroom for all the students enrolled in the course. This formal speech enabled us to provide general information to the eligible students about the core purposes of the intended study. The initial presentation was completed with more personal meetings in which the students were given further details concerning the purposes of the research. In addition, these personal meetings helped us to collect more detailed information about the students who eventually volunteered to participate in the research.

The interview consisted of a structured protocol of ad hoc–designed questions (i.e., following the appropriate scientific guidelines) aimed at covering the selected research topic and objectives. Based on Pelto and Pelto (1978), we outlined a basic interview that ensured consistency of all the collected information. For such purposes, the same types and amount of questions were used for all the interviewed participants.

Following Miles and Huberman (1984), the collection of data was combined with analysis and valuation in an interactive and cyclical process, aimed at determining when enough information had been collected. This made it necessary to combine the collection and reduction of the gross data obtained from each subject, aimed at facilitating the management of the information and determining its quantitative appropriateness based on the point at which data saturation was achieved.

In the description and interpretation of interview contents, we decided not to question the veracity and authenticity of the collected information (Denzin, 1989). The interviewed participants were allowed to think and to provide us truthful and convincing explanations (Walker, 1989). However, in ensure their internal validity, we established consistent categories exclusive of content analyses by delimiting the respective meaning units through the configuration of their common elements, repetition, disclosure, and singularity (Fleet & Cambourne, 1984). According to Miles and Huberman (1984), we established both descriptive and interpretative codes. Tentative reflection generates important conclusions and contributes to connect the discussion to the main analysis (Woods, 1993). In addition, the presentation and discussion of the results enabled us to draw and compare our main conclusions.

The reliability of the category codifications was discussed and agreed on with a group of researchers involved in the project. Once all the information collected in the interviews had been codified by one of the main researchers and her assistants, another main researcher repeated the codification (Goetz & LeCompte, 1988). The level of agreement between both codifications was high.

Results

By way of example, and for the purposes of providing the readers with a series of evidence that enables them to achieve a deeper understanding of the results and subsequent discussion, significant excerpts of the interviews are quoted below.

Time Devoted by Professors to Tutorial Action

Higher education students think that professors should comply with their tutorial obligations within officially established hours so that they can attend the tutorials to make their queries and comments. This fact is related to the public, regulated obligations professors have toward the university.

More than half of the interviewed students expressed disappointment about the lack of attention and tutorial schedule compliance by university professors, although an encouraging percentage of students considered that the time devoted by professors to tutorial action was adequate.

The results concerning the presence of professors in their offices during tutorial hours according to the students' responses are discouraging because not even compulsory tutorial hours are satisfactorily respected. In the interviews, students made clear their general desire for rigorous compliance with tutorial hours. A student expressed it as follows:

> As concerning tutorial support, we need professors to respect their tutorial hours since sometimes they are at the university premises but not in their offices, and it is an inconvenience to go to other professors' offices to find them or to wait until they return. (Interview 29, female, 20 years)

Professors behave less responsibly in relation to tutorials than in relation to classroom lessons. Among the reasons for this situation, we find the fact that university professors are not aware of the importance of tutorial action as an essential part of their academic duties.

> I would like tutorials to be as important as classroom hours and professors to attach less importance to classroom lessons and more to tutorials. (Interview 36, female, 23 years)

The type of education developed by university professors in the classroom mainly follows collective teaching methods, which are characterized by the prevalence of professor–student one-way communication (Colom, 1988). This teaching methodology has prevailed historically and is mainly focused on the transfer of information and on the obligation of students to be physically present in the classroom.

Contributions From Tutorial Action and Students' Expectations

In the interviews, the students informed us about the ways in which tutorial action contributes to their education. This contribution is mainly focused on the resolution of situations associated with particular problems and academic doubts that students encounter during their studies.

We have found that, according to students, tutorials enable them to solve their doubts on academic and/or bureaucratic issues: solving problems associated with their practical training (*practicum)*, revising the grades obtained in exams, and requesting help for the development of classroom activities and essays. Several responses support this opinion:

> I have resorted to tutorials basically for issues associated with exams, essays [assistance with bibliography and essay topics], and practicum [selection and guidance concerning the destiny institution]. On one occasion, I also visited a professor of the first year during tutorial hours to borrow a book we had used in his course, which was of much help for an essay I had to write. (Interview 24, female, 20 years)

We should stress, however, that students think professors treat them kindly and provide them with the information they need.

> I have attended tutorial hours to solve doubts about the course program or about essays I had to write . . . and to revise grades. I have used tutorials also to clarify some concepts that were not completely clear both about specific topics the professor had dealt with in classroom lessons and about class work. (Interview 45, female, 25 years)

We understand that not every student finds it necessary to request additional information about other academic and bureaucratic issues during tutorial hours and that they do not know that these are issues associated with the tutorial function.

Students claim that the use they make of tutorials is rather similar to their demands and insist that tutorial support should facilitate the revision of exams and the resolution of doubts and queries associated with the writing of essays. They further claim that tutorial action should also serve as a means to clarify grades, collect information, and become aware of available job opportunities. Some of these issues are addressed in the following response:

> During tutorial hours, professors should guide the work of students both on an individual and on a group basis and above all provide us with the necessary advice to organize our practical activities in relation to the labor market. (Interview 36, female, 23 years)

Similar comments to the above were repeated by several students in different parts of the interviews. As the readers can note, this response refers to unsatisfied demands concerning tutorial attention.

Weaknesses and Difficulties Identified by Students in Tutorial Action

The weaknesses and difficulties identified by students in tutorial support received from professors are associated with the demands they have formulated in their answers. Students identify the following basic weaknesses and obstacles in tutorial action:

- Lack of personalization;
- Incompliance with tutorial schedules and short time commitment;
- Need to increase the time devoted by professors to cover students demands;
- Poor information regarding future job opportunities; and
- The continuation of studies and the understanding of the internal operation of the university.

It is rather significant that students claimed to feel deprived of elements they had mentioned as important when referring to the quality of tutorial support, the time devoted by professors to it, and the demands they made on the extension of tutorial-associated functions.

One of the most important weaknesses identified by students in current tutorial support is its lack of personalization despite its being an essential resource in the personal development of students (Hartley, 1998; Ramsden, 1992). This is stressed in the responses in the interviews:

> More personal tutorial support, which is not limited to 2 weekly hours since it should serve to treat the separate case of each student. In many occasions this seems to be impossible, especially in particular periods, given the high number of students waiting at the door of the professor's office. (Interview 32, female, 24 years)

Indeed, in specific periods of the academic year, it is common to find high numbers of students waiting at the door of the professor's office. These periods mostly coincide with exams and/or with the assessment of particular essays or with the commencement of the degree's practicum. In these cases, the professor usually receives students in small groups, trying to unify types of needs, to reduce waiting

times, and to avoid giving the same answer to all students who come to tutorials with similar doubts. Still, students demand a more personalized treatment. Professors should therefore be very aware of the importance of personalizing the training process to address the real interests and motivations of students (Price, 2000).

The professors' neglecting of tutorial action mentioned by students might also be associated with the wide range of duties, requirements, and responsibilities Spanish university professors are required to undertake: management tasks, organization, preparation of lessons, research, and so on.

On the other hand, students declare that they are finally able to find the professors and that these are usually friendly and try to help them in solving their most urgent problems.

> I think the treatment given to students in tutorials in this faculty is more individualized and informal. I can attend tutorials without problems. (Interview 4, male, 27 years)

Another important difficulty results from the reduced time students have available to attend tutorials because most of them coincide with classroom hours of other professors. This adds to schedule incompliance by professors. Given the high amount of subjects and of classroom hours per subject the students have to complete, it is likely that the classroom hours of one professor will coincide with the tutorial hours of others. This could be solved with a different distribution of the time devoted to tutorial support among morning, afternoon, and evening hours.

The solution to the problem, however, is not an easy one because, apart from tutorials, professors have to comply with their teaching hours and maintain their research activities, both things requiring a high level of work and time allocation. In most cases, these obstacles are solved with the coordinated efforts of both the professor and the students by means of a personalized management of individual time problems and the decision of the professor to receive the student at a different time previously agreed to.

> Sometimes tutorials coincide with classroom hours of other professors, and then some professors agree on receiving students at a different time. This higher availability of professors is helpful and nice. Other professors are less available, even during their official tutorial schedules, but those are a minority. In general, my experience with tutorial action is positive. (Interview 35, female, 21 years)

Because tutorial schedules are fixed before the academic year begins, it is not uncommon that some tutorial hours coincide with departmental, degree, faculty, or research meetings and other activities. When such a meeting is held, if professors are not busy with other duties, they usually change the time of the tutorial or leave a message at the door of their office stating where they are (in case students need to urgently find them).

Some students also mentioned other weaknesses in tutorial action, such as the lack of information concerning possible future job opportunities and access to other studies. We should not forget that our sample was composed of students in their last year who were about to complete their studies. These complaints might be associated with the students' unawareness that the provision of this type of information is included among the duties of a tutor.

We have not found any demands for tutorial action by students from higher university levels that might be rather useful (Zenanko & Zenanko, 1996). This might be because of poor or nonexistent relationships of students with older students who already completed the degree or with students from different levels or from related degrees (e.g., psychopedagogy) or because of their general unawareness of the existence of this type of tutorial action.

Conclusions and Discussion

The micro-educational situation we have described in the previous sections provides situation-based information associated with the special features of the examined scenario. However, it might be equally analyzed in a wider environment that composes structural elements and processes permitting the generalization of knowledge. Therefore, we invite readers to compare the setting, critical assessments, and special circumstances of their own training scenarios to the situation and opinions described here, with the ultimate aim of transferring the latter to their context, to the extent possible (Brown & Yule, 1998).

Tutorial action associated with the type of university teaching provided to students, as it is currently approached, does not seem to guarantee enough time allocation. This time shortage is caused both by the poor attention paid by professors to their weekly tutorial schedules and by the general distribution of schedules. Therefore, it might be advisable that professors revise their commitments and professional duties for the purpose of improving this support service, even if this may have a negative impact on their other areas of professional development: direction management, research, and so on. Apart from their disciplinary competence, professors should undertake tutorial action with their students as an extension of their teaching duties and adopt ethical behavior in their professional environment (Campbell, 2003).

The university of the 21st century cannot maintain the current trend to prioritize (classroom) teaching and research, especially at a time when we face the need to review the curricula of the different degrees. In fact, tutorial action has been claimed to play an important role in the global training curriculum as a means to encourage the integral development of students both as citizens and as professional workers (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Sephen, 2003).

The official planning of schedules in higher education should avoid overlaps between tutorials and classroom hours and should require full compliance by professors with tutorial hours distributed in different days of the week and among morning, afternoon, and evening periods. This might require a highly complex organization, particularly when the same professor has teaching and tutorial duties in different degrees and in different university campuses. A possible solution would be to include obligatory group tutorials in the students' general schedule (i.e., giving the opportunity to a group of students with common interests or preparing class work in common to attend group tutorials on a periodical basis to receive advice from the professor). Another possibility might be to make more use of communication and information technologies, for instance, by means of online tutorial support (Daeid, 2001).

Among the essential benefits of tutorial action, students stress the solution of particular difficulties and of regular academic doubts. Their concerns are mainly focused on disagreements regarding the grades granted to them by professors in the official evaluation, which leads them to attend tutorials to revise their exams, and on the need to receive appropriate advice to collect and structure information for the writing of complementary essays. From the above, we can conclude that the functions most frequently demanded by students and fulfilled by tutors are included in the bureaucratic and academic tutorial categories.

The work developed up to now leads us to defend the need for a reorganization of the structure of higher education tutorial action, suggesting its implementation at two levels: individually and in small groups. This way of approaching tutorial action would facilitate its personalization and guarantee to a higher extent attention and responses to the needs, weaknesses, and expectations expressed by students. These complementary aims would enable a more integral support and follow-up for students. At the same time, the creation of a personalized student sheet might be helpful to keep a record of students' data. Such sheets might be attached to the results obtained by students in the official evaluation exams. In addition, the available information about academic essays and procedures developed by the student could also be collected and recorded in the student sheets.

Likewise, it is possible and important, both from the pedagogical perspective and from the human perspective, that higher-level students of the same or of related degrees provide first-year students with advice and guidance concerning particular activities. This type of tutorial action can be used, for instance, as a means to introduce students to the campus infrastructure and resources, to facilitate their integration into the cultural and academic environment of the university, to explain to them the most difficult concepts of given courses of the degree, to share with them strategies for course organization, and so on. In addition, it seems necessary to implement a tutorial action plan that is fully integrated into the training program as a whole so that, apart from the academic-disciplinary approach, other types of functions, concerning future job opportunities and areas of professional action, can be included. We should not forget the advisability of providing specific guidance for risk students (Abrams & Jernigan, 1984).

Finally, we would like to emphasize that higher university tutors should have both professional and personal motivation and appropriate general didactic and specialized disciplinary training. This training should enable the transmission of information to students, thus facilitating their disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning as future professional workers and citizens. In this sense, tutors have an important role to play as guides, advisers, and counselors, which is to be added to the promotion of basic guidelines toward the development of research as a relevant element of university training and professional promotion.

Recommendation

It is important to make transparent the forms and processes of academic discourse and to introduce a variety of strategies that enable students to select those that best suit their characteristics and that help them to be most successful in their training (Burns & Sinfield, 2004). These tutoring strategies may vary based on the different types of knowledge to be learned (VanLehn, Siler, Murray, Yamauchi, & Baggett, 2003).

Some proposals aimed at improving the success of tutorial action in higher education are presented below:

- It is interesting to combine different cooperative tutoring approaches both with family support services and with university support services (Madden, 2006).
- Communication between the tutor and the students could be fostered by combining face-to-face and online tutoring, thus achieving different types and degrees of interaction. In face-to-face tutoring, the tutor leads the conversation, whereas in online tutoring it is the student who commands the medium discourse and therefore feels more uninhibited. In fact, research on different teaching and tutoring methods proves that the development of closer relationships with teachers and students feeling that their teachers are "present" have positive implications for students (Ashwin, 2006; Silen, 2006).

Online teaching and tutoring would have major benefits and limitations. Nevgi, Virtanen, and Niemi (2006) reported that students themselves identified the improvement of their teamwork and cooperative learning skills as the main benefit of Web-based teaching.

Regarding the disadvantages of online tutoring, some students express dissatisfaction with the one-way communication system and with the control the teacher exerts over the system's functionalities. This dissatisfaction is also apparent among teachers, who perceive this type of tutoring as involving an important load of work and requiring a technological and functional command of the system and the diversification of the students' offer (Ng, 2007).

Technology as a medium for instruction is an invaluable tool to improve the most traditional methods of teaching (Dismukes, Yarbrough, Zenanko, & Zenanko, 2004).

However, we agree with Sweeney, O'Donoghue, and Whitehead (2004) on their suggestion of a balanced use of both types of tutorials (online and face-to-face).

- It is important to enable customized support, as opposed to the bureaucratic and academic teaching categories of tutorial action, although teachers typically adopt this type of tutoring because of students demanding insistently them.
- It is important to foster peer-to-peer tutoring, which requires students to solve their own problems. When working in groups, students can collaborate by helping, advising, and judging their peers' performances and by making suggestions to improve the teaching and learning process on a feedback basis. The use of debate-provoking dynamics gets students involved in the solution of problem situations and in the development of valuable skills for their academic and professional training.
- It is important to design and develop a horizontally and vertically coordinated tutorial action plan involving all the players in the university community on an adequate balance. For such purpose, the functions and action patterns are to be defined in the adequate context, aimed at meeting the unique needs and demands of users. We stress the importance of developing regulatory guidelines that result from a consensus of the university community by establishing schedules and tutoring varieties that match the needs and expectations of the students, aimed at advising, guiding, supporting, and leading students throughout their training process as a means to optimize their integral development.

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