Roles and Competencies of Online Teachers

Vera Queiroz
vcqm [at] uol.com.br
Pollyana N. Mustaro
pnmustaro [at] terra.com.br
Universidade de São Paulo (São Paulo, Brazil)

Introduction

With the great demand for online courses, there is an urgent necessity to reflect upon the roles and competencies of teachers who plan to deliver courses via Internet. This reflection is important due to the fact that some teachers believe that it is possible to simply transfer to the Web the material (curricular content) that is traditionally used in the classroom without any adjustment to the media. Each medium requires different approaches to be used. The teachers should be trained to work online and "instructed" so they can achieve their pedagogical goals in a more effective, creative and innovative way when using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Online Teachers

The first aspect to be considered in this study deals with the definition of competence.

According to Spector and la Teja (2001):

> *"Competence refers to a state of being well qualified to perform an activity, task or job function. When a person is competent to do something, he or she has achieved a state of competence that is recognizable and verifiable to a particular community of practitioners. A competency, then, refers to the way that a state of competence can be demonstrated to the relevant community".[1]*

The authors also call attention to the fact that *"The structure and assessment of competencies may differ from one community of practice to another and even within a community".* So what are the competencies that should be achieved by online teachers?

The constant and fast change of information and communication technology requires a continuous process of development of competencies online teachers should have and demands lifelong professional preparation and proper pedagogical training. Without training and online experience, teachers will continue to duplicate their practices onto the Internet and will not profit adequately from the new media.

Much of what has been published to better prepare a teacher to teach online refers to the use of technology per se, teaching manuals and lists of requirements for tutoring online.

Berge (1995) shows a list of recommendations that the teacher/moderator must be aware of during the planning and implementation of the materials and the course. These recommendations are grouped into four areas: pedagogical (use of discursive resources as to facilitate learning), social (incentive of human relations among members of the group), managerial (establishment of general procedures for discussion and development of activities) and technical (transparency of technology for an adequate relation between the system, the software and the interface selected).

Palloff and Pratt (1999) -- in their book entitled **Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace** -- work with the four areas proposed by Berge. The authors comment on the importance of each of these areas and give examples based on their own experience in online seminars.

It is important to mention that online teachers have to cope with the roles of becoming the managers and facilitators of the learning process. For a course to be successful, it is necessary that there is an inter-relation among these areas, what has not been discussed

deeply in the present literature in respect to the competencies of teaching online. On the other hand, the literature mentions competencies that are unique to online environments. These competencies are: to be able to use technology; to have skills to design and implement courses (depending on the applications to be used); to moderate, organize and archive asynchronous discussions; to establish ground rules, guide and animate synchronous discussions; to integrate different teaching and learning styles to the course; to interact actively with students and give them constant feedback; to make students aware of cultural differences among members of a group, of Internet ethics and netiquettes, among others.

A teacher who wants to work online also needs to understand the nature and philosophy of distance education.

Teaching online also requires a change in the educational paradigm. Whereas in the traditional teaching the learning process is centered on the teacher -- who tries to transfer his/her knowledge to the students --, in online teaching (not merely instructional), the teaching is focused on the relationship between the teacher/student and student/ knowledge. The student is guided to learn to be more autonomous, participative and more responsible for his/her own learning. The new educational paradigm leads the teacher to find educational practices that stimulate this type of online learning.

If, on one hand, there is the challenge created by this type of teaching; on the other hand there are advantages in its use. The democratization of access to education, the flexibility and personalization of learning, the motivation to continued education and learning to learn are some of them. As disadvantages of this type of teaching we can cite, for instance: the feeling of isolation created by the lack of personal contact among the participants of a group and the results of an evaluation done at a distance. Even though this type of evaluation doesn«t seem as reliable as that of face-to-face education if one considered the possibilities of fraud and plagiarism, one cannot deny that these facts can also occur in classroom teaching.

Online Course

All effective online programs require an initial serious planning of the proposed objectives of the course and careful studies of the profile, characteristics and needs of the students. The technology can only be selected after a critical analysis of its appropriateness to the objectives and the content of the course, and the ways it is going to be used with and by the students.

In order to take advantage of the use of synchronous and asynchronous communication in an online course, teachers need to reflect upon the objectives of the course, and then design and implement activities that integrate these tools to the course to be delivered.

According to Moran[2], an online course of good quality is that *"makes us think, involves us actively, brings significant contributions and connects us with people, experiences and interesting ideas"* [3]. The author complements the idea saying that, besides the content, the course must present better elaborated materials (which unfold in a hypertextual format, through links and other resources), lead to research and the joint production, as well as the personalization of the process of teaching and learning. The proposal presented by Moran is complemented by Lévy (1999) when he says that most important than the hypertextual techniques and tools to be used in distance education and open learning is the "pedagogical style" adopted. Lévy adds the importance of the teacher as the "animator of the collective intelligence" of the groups of students and as the guider of the individual learning process.

One of the real changes that the use of education in online mode brought refers to the teacher. He/She takes the role of a guider who helps the students to search for, select and organize the information, to manage the time and the studies and to construct knowledge in an autonomous way or in virtual learning communities. While playing the role of the students« motivator of the whole learning process, the educator also integrates and forms groups for discussion, research and accomplishment of the tasks.

The critical reflection about the teacher who works with distance education as a methodological tool is linked to the context of learning (mediated by technology), to the methods (different than those used in the classroom), to the students, to the teacher own computer literacy (hardware, software and technical support needed), and other matters permeated by the digital culture, psychology, time management and concepts of what should be learned.

According to Belloni the relationship between education and technology implies in "that the use of \OE technologyâ (in the sense of technical artifact), in a teaching and learning situation, must be followed by a reflection about the \OE technologyâ (in the sense of knowledge embedded in the artifact and in its context of production and utilization)" (2001, p. 53).[4]

The work of structuring and implementing educational projects in distance education depends not only on the technology but mainly on the teacher.

Emergent Educational Paradigm

The paradigmatic-educational change can be expressed through the comparison established/shown in the chart that follows:

Actual Paradigm Emergent Paradigm

To relation to	Teacher (how it is)	How it should be...
Teacher	Has and transmits knowledge	Guides the studies
Student	Receives contents in a passive way	Interacts with contents, groups and learns in an autonomous way.
Classroom	Place for knowledge transmission.	Place for construction and exchange of knowledge.
Experience	Process of hierarchical transmission from teacher to student	Process of exchange between members of the group which is integrated by the teacher
Learning and Studies	Obligatory, punishable	Pleasant (conduct to one«s growth)
Curricular Contents	Pre-established in a rigid and restricted format	Flexible and open structure that can lead to multiple paths.
Technological Media (NCT) ÷ New Communications Technologies	Used only to call attention to a certain theme and to make it more "agreeable"	It«s part of the spacial environment of the classroom and presents different types of integrated simultaneous media
Tecnology ÷ Educational Informatics	The teacher is afraid of being replaced by an instructional machine	The machine is seen as an element to stimulate learning
Use of NCT -- New Communications Technologies	The NCTs are used by the teacher who structures his/her classes in advance	Both teachers and students use the NCTs, what makes it possible to exchange knowledge and ideas

In the emergent paradigm the error as something "bad" or "negative" would be surmounted. It would be seen as an area of possibilities for getting things right. In this proposal the panic of the "omnipotent teacher" (the one who knows about all subject matters) would also be eliminated, opening space for a well-prepared educator who has passion for searching knowledge together with his/her students, and thus forming a team of researchers. This type of work is linked to cooperative learning:

> *"Cooperative Learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to achieve shared goals. In cooperative learning groups students are given two responsibilities: to learn the assigned material and to make sure that all other group members do likewise. Cooperative learning may be used to teach specific content (formal cooperative learning groups), to ensure active cognitive processing information during lectures (informal cooperative learning groups), and to provide long-term support and assistance for academic progress (cooperative base groups. Any assignment in any curriculum for any age student can be structured cooperatively if the teacher has the proper training".[5]*

The proposal of cooperative learning is linked and permeated by clear goals and objectives that the group plans to achieve with the joint work. Everyone can see their role and contribution to the group, as well as the enrichment and productivity that come from this type of educational work. As to individuality it is necessary to say that in any cooperative approach the students have the opportunity to discuss ideas and points of view. This attitude gives rise to the growth and practice of autonomy and collective interaction.

One must state that there is no interaction without disorder (inequality, turmoil, commotion); however, there is neither order nor organization without interaction. From this statement it is possible to understand that the concepts of order and organization are interconnected and that whoever plans to educate also wishes to transform.

The changes of our society and the technological advance presented in this article show a restructure of the teaching practice,

implemented by a critical reflection about the use of the available tools, about the limitations and advantages of each media presented as didactic resource and about the work itself of the teacher in the digital environment. Such work has to do with the development of new roles and competencies that must be dealt with in academic studies and incorporated to the school curriculum of any institution that offers teaching courses for professionals of any area of studies. Only through this perspective it would be possible to change the present attitude which is based on the positivism.

The teacher wants a partially finished product -- following the positivists« approach; however, the school should perform a regenerative/generative activity. The work with computers allows the concrete perception of this statement as, for instance, through the analogy with the text publishing. One should not forget that Education is more than instruction: it is a new structure based on social-educational practices. So, teachers, researchers and the members of a university must leave this isolation and agree that cooperative work in each level of knowledge is fundamental to the development and establishment of a "collective intelligent", as stated by Lévy (1998).

Conclusion

The effectiveness of an online course requires from a teacher more than only technical knowledge, but a reflective and innovative attitude that prioritizes the learning process focused on the student. This process is complemented by a constant evaluation of the course and the tools used to deliver courses online.

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Footnotes

- 1 SPECTOR, J. M. & La TEJA. "Competencies for Online Teaching". *Eric Digest***. Dec. 2001. <http://ericit.org/digests/EDO-IR-2001-09.shtml> (04/25/2003)
- 2 MORAN, José Manuel. "O que é um bom curso a distância?". <http://www.eca.usp.br/prof/moran/bom_curso.htm> (05/05/2003).
- 3 [Original in Portuguese] "*nos faz pensar, nos envolve ativamente, traz contribuições significativas e nos põe em contato com pessoas, experiências e idéias interessantes"*.
- 4 [Original in Portuguese] *"que o uso de uma 'tecnologia' (no sentido de um artefato técnico), em situação de ensino e aprendizagem, deve estar acompanhado de uma reflexão sobre a 'tecnologia' (no sentido do conhecimento embutido no artefato e em seu contexto de produção e utilização)"*
- 5 "Cooperative Learning and Conflict Resolution." *New Horizons for Learning*, 1997/1998, <http://www.newhorizons.org/trm_johnson.html> (10/11/1998).

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