The Strategic Role of the E-Tutor in New Learning Contexts

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Abstract. Digital media have opened up new opportunities to review e-learning. The three ages of media describe a shift from technology for distance education, to technology-supported groups and, currently, technology for Community development. Reflecting on the profile of the e-tutor in the third phase of e-learning, our research was guided by three key-questions: what functions does the e-tutor fulfill? What tools does the e-tutor need? What actions should the e-tutor take care of, in term of communication? The research plan, carried out on 9 online courses, is based on quanti-qualitative method (a pre-course survey, a post-course survey, learning analytics, content analysis of tutor's interactions and self-report). The results highlight the strategic role of the e-tutor in new contexts of learning.

Keywords: E-tutor · E-learning · Online community

1 Introduction

E-tutor had always represented the bridge between institutional training programs and individual needs, between staff and participants and between teachers and learners, interacting «directly with learners to support their learning process when they are separated from the tutor in time and place for some or all of these direct interactions» [1]. It has been a multi-face profession as the terms used in literature to refer to: online tutor, online moderator [2], e-moderator [3], distance education tutor, e-instructors [4], online teachers [5], online instructors [6], e-tutor [1].

Literary review highlights e-tutoring as a «central instructional strategy, integrated fully in everyday learning and teaching in institutions» [7]. As de Metz showed, he is «strategically important for the perception of the quality and attractiveness of the university but conversely can also be a vulnerable link in the university's educational chain» [8]. This is the reason why identifying tutoring skills is necessary for the success of e-learning [9]: these don't deal with subject matter expertise and technical skills but

require pedagogical, information, and communication skills to manage and facilitate online learning.

More than 20 years ago, Ryan et al. [10] and Lentell [11] advised that the role of e-tutors is not *stabile*, but it is changing. According to them, this change is necessary nowadays. Digital media have opened up new opportunities to review e-learning [12]. The three ages of media describe a shift from «technology for distance education», to «technology-supported groups» and, currently, «technology for Community development» [13].

Reflecting on the profile of the e-tutor in the third phase of e-learning, our research was guided by three key-questions:

- What functions does the e-tutor fulfill?
- What tools does the e-tutor need?
- What communication actions should the e-tutor take care of?

1.1   Research Contexts

In this contribution we analyze the role of the e-tutor in nine different courses offered by Catholic University of Milan (Italy), that refer to three main contexts (Table 1).

Table 1.   Contexts and courses

Context	Course name	N. of participants
1. Third mission, MOOC	1. *Virtually* (4 editions)	2321
	2. *3-6-9-12: growing up with digital screens* (3 editions)	3154
	3. *Digital education* (1 edition)	4877
	4. *Peer&Media education* (3 editions)	1608
	5. *Community tutor* (3 editions)	969
	6. *Spectrum of cyberbullying behaviors* (5 edition)	5878
2. Higher education, blended learning	1. *Business management and consulting (*Master's degree)	405
3. Third mission, E-learning	1. *Teaching with episodes of situated learning – beginner* (2 editions)	89
	2. *Teaching with episodes of situated learning – advanced* (1 edition)	25

According to Tuunainen [14], the Third Mission encompasses a wide range of activities involving the generation, the use, the application and the exploitation of knowledge

and other university capabilities outside academic environments, in order to promote technology transfer and innovation, social engagement and continuing education.

Since the academic year 2014/15, CREMIT (Research Centre about Media Education, Innovation and Technology), in collaboration with ILAB (Centre for innovation and development of educational and technological activities), decided to experiment with MOOCs as a new environment for Media Education training.

MOOCs took place in Blackboard Open Education, an affordable platform based on the same virtual learning environment (VLE) adopted by Catholic University since 2001 (Blackboard Academic Suite). Blackboard Open Education offers essential technological functionalities: learning unit easy to set up; good tracking tools; badges; adaptive release to make different paths for the users.

Six different MOOCs, representing a complete path in media education, both for the topics discussed and for the design choices, has been offered:

- *"Virtually"* [15], *"3-6-9-12: growing up with digital screens"* [16] and *"Digital education"* for building an educational framework;
- *"Peer&Media education"* [17] and *"Community tutor"* [13] for providing methodological perspectives;
- *"Spectrum of cyberbullying behaviors"* for presenting cyber-stupidity as a framework to understand digital phenomena.

MOOCs represent a "light" training model to reach many adults (parents, educators, health workers, teachers, university students, police and services etc.) increasing their digital literacy and not just their digital practices [18]. The main features are the easy enrollment, the choice of gamification, the accurate balance of number and length of video-lessons and the in-depth analysis of the time needed for the activities. This "lightness", engaging and motivating participants, is a sort of "passage" running to a more institutional training system, both to university courses and to in-service training for teachers and professionals.

The Faculty of Economics designed an innovative Master's Degree to better support working students: this was an opportunity to develop a blended solution in the academic year 2016/17. The features of the blended model are a mix of synchronous (webinars and live feed-backs to solve problems or doubts related to contents or activities) and asynchronous online activities (video lessons, forums) and intensive training in the classroom (biweekly), individual and group assessment, e-tutoring [19].

In order to satisfy the several training requests regarding the method of Episodes of Situated Learning [20] by teachers of all levels, in the academic year 2018/19, an e-learning course for beginners was developed and delivered in two editions [21]. In the academic year 2019/20 an advanced course was designed to guide the mastery of the ESL method.

In the courses mentioned above, e-tutors carry out a variety of tasks concerning at least five clear functions [22]:

- technological: it is essential to set up and manage the online environment and to guarantee the first access, solving technical issues to decrease the levels of anxiety of

the participants towards technological tools. The e-tutor can also act as a facilitator, in order to promote a conscious and critical use of technology;

- organizational: this function is connected to the course and activities design and management of space, time and training contract;
- social: the e-tutor takes care of the social environment, creating the conditions for facilitating socialization among the participants, enlivening the discussion boards and observing the trend of the online messaging;
- conceptual: this pedagogical function is essential for supporting the learning process and furthering the knowledge building of the community. The discussion boards are the privileged place where this function can manifest mostly, even if several participants favor one-to-one correspondence with the e-tutor;
- evaluative: this function is provided for in all phases of the training course. The e-tutor tests and monitors technology before and during the course time; he gives feedback to participants on content and activities; it gives feed-back to staff, even through data analysis.

Finally, the peculiarities of the contexts that differently solicits the e-tutor in carrying out his functions must be underlined (Table 2).

Table 2. The peculiarities of the three contexts

	MOOC	Blended learning	E-learning
Class size	Large class size per edition (300–5000)	High number of active students at once (100)	Small class size per edition (30)
E-tutor	Subject matter expert	Not a subject matter expert	Subject matter expert
Evaluation	Not an e-tutor's responsibility	E-tutor's responsibility	Not an e-tutor's responsibility
Assessment	E-tutor's responsibility	Not an e-tutor's responsibility	E-tutor's responsibility
VLE	One for each edition	Student Community, 27 courses of the graduate program[a]	One for each edition

[a]E-tutor updates and oversees the Student Community, a dedicated environment which joins all the students. Students are also enrolled in specific courses, depending on their own study plan.

2 A Nested Method

The research plan is based on quanti-qualitative method:

- a pre-course survey which includes questions about demographic information, previous experiences and motivations of students attending the course. We selected the items referred to student's expectations toward e-tutors;

- a post-course survey to collect students' satisfaction. Questions about tutoring allowed us to collect data on perceived importance and incisiveness of tutors;
- learning analytics to categorize participation's styles (activity patterns, communications, activities, tests attempts) to enhance and evaluate learners' experience and comparing it with the e-tutor's strategies;
- on a qualitative side, we analyzed e-tutor's interaction and presence within discussion boards, announcements and e-mail. Content analysis is used to understand the processes of learning and tutoring. We refer to Salmon's model [23] that provides five steps to analyze perceptions, processes and products of online learning and community building [24]. In this theory, the e-tutor plays a fundamental role in knowledge construction through different communication approaches and styles. In our research we analyzed e-tutor's messages in the different contexts;
- finally, we gathered data from the e-tutor's self-report. The inventory of practices was based on the 5 competences used to define the e-tutor's role. Self-report was introduced not only to enquire tutor's practice but also to encourage self-awareness and force multiple perspectives [25].

Among six mixed methods of designing research strategies [26], a concurrent nested approach has been adopted. The quantitative methods (surveys and learnings analytics) guided data collection and analysis above e-tutor's functions and e-tutor's customer satisfaction. Instead the analysis of different forms of interaction and communicative exchanges, online practices and (qualitative approach) were embedded in the research process to seek information on e-tutor reconceptualization from different level.

In Table 3, we can see data collection tools and numerousness for each context.

Table 3. Research tools and data collected

Research tools	MOOC	Blended learning	E-learning
Pre-course survey	14710	269	115
Post-course survey	8829	224	101
Discussion board analysis	943	–	1041
Announcements analysis	40	–	6
E-mail analysis	–	306	–
E-tutor self-report	5	2	3

As shown in the table, to analyse communication we used data from different computer-mediated formats (email, discussion boards, announcements) according to the design of the course.

In the MOOCs and in the e-learning courses the "beating heart" of learning were the discussion board, in which all the members participated due to the pedagogical contract. Tutor's posts were categorized using Salmon's model [3] that represents a framework

to monitor and understand the effectiveness of tutor communicative strategies. The five steps represent a natural process and help to foster online student engagement and learning using the discussion boards, highlighting both technical support and e-moderation action. These step were used to tag each message:

1. Access and Motivation (setting up system and accessing vs welcoming and encouraging);
2. Welcoming and Encouraging (sending and receiving messages vs familiarizing and providing bridges between cultural, social and learning environments);
3. Information Exchange (searching personalizing software vs facilitating task and supporting use of learning materials);
4. Knowledge Construction (conferencing vs facilitating process);
5. Development (providing links outside closed conferences vs supporting responding).

Each stage calls for different e-tutor's skills and fosters to develop a rich variety of communication techniques in line with e-tutor own strengths, beliefs and context requirements.

In these two contexts, announcements analysis was introduced to register the formal communication, to registered important event of the course to better understand the discussions in the boards.

A different CMC format was required by the Blended Learning context. Having ascertained that the Community forums were not used for sharing doubts or considerations and that, on the contrary, the freshmen (73% of workers) preferred an exclusive and private contact with the e-tutor (74% sent an email to the tutor at least once), it was decided to monitor more carefully one-to-one asynchronous communication: among the other research instruments, a monitoring grid of incoming and outgoing email between e-tutor and students was implemented[1]. All the messages, sent and received, were categorized using four labels:

– technological (anomalies, technical problems…);
– organizational (calendars, timetables…);
– didactic (study plan, teaching materials, discussion forums, work groups…);
– social-relational (from the e-tutor's point of view: spontaneous support offers, demonstrations of interest; from the students' point of view: informal messages, signs of gratitude and appreciation, personal experiences affecting motivation or attendance…).

3 Results

3.1 The Essential Role of the E-Tutor

The pre-course survey allowed us to collect student's expectations towards the role of the e-tutor.

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[1] The Excel grid was designed starting from some useful tips included in the digital extension of the book (M13.3 pp. 23–28, edited by Andrea Garavaglia) [27].

The main expectations of the participants of MOOCs relate to the exploration of topics of personal interest (71%) and the download of useful contents for educational or professional activities (46%). Discussing topics with colleagues and e-tutors is not a priority (26%). Participants of MOOCs expect the e-tutor to perform mainly a conceptual ("Clarifying any doubts regarding the contents", 41%), organizational ("Send course and content updates", 39%) and technological function ("Help desk", 24%).

Among the distinctive elements of the blended course, students consider extremely important to deepen useful topics for the profession both theoretically and hands-on (69%), the opportunity to organize study and attendance according to one's personal and work commitments (64%), the webinars' recordings (62%) and teaching materials in different formats (57%). The most appreciated features are the possibility of using online materials and managing activities asynchronously, as highlighted in a recent meta-analysis [28]. Only 33% of participants consider taking advantage of the e-tutor support an extremely relevant element. Furthermore, students expect the e-tutor to perform mainly an organizational and technological function.

The main expectations of the participants of the e-learning courses concern the design of an Episode of Situated Learning, thanks to the guidance of the e-tutor (45%) and the study of the ESL method (32%). Participants expect the e-tutor to perform mainly a conceptual function ("Being guided in the design activity", 32%; "Clarifying any doubts regarding the contents", 29%).

Data comparison between pre-course, in which students underrate the relevance of e-tutor, and post-course survey (high percentage of satisfaction) highlights the importance of his presence.

As seen in Table 4, satisfaction in all the courses is distributed on the higher values of the scale (a six-point Likert scale, from 1 = totally dissatisfied to 6 = totally satisfied).

Table 4. Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction		MOOC	Blended learning	E-learning
Overall	Totally satisfied	49%	26%	59%
	Very satisfied	37%	56%	32%
E-tutoring	Totally satisfied	30%	37%	80%
	Very satisfied	32%	45%	14%

The percentage of completion of the courses represents a further element of satisfaction: 63% participants of MOOCs, 56% students of the Master's Degree[2] and 93% participants of the e-learning courses complete the course and obtain the final degree.

According to the e-moderation model [3] and constructivism, we imagined that e-tutor had to fade away during the course: as noted in the qualitative comments of the post-course survey and in the self-report of the e-tutors, the feed-back of the participants was, on the contrary, that they'd liked him/her to be present during the whole learning process in the three contexts. This result was unexpected in MOOC.

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[2] The percentage of graduates is calculated taking as a basis the number of students who currently have completed the two-year period (n. 303).

3.2   The Shape of Tutorship in Different Learning Contexts

An important outcome of our research is the task analysis in the three different e-learning models.

Data from the self-report describe the self-perception of the own tutorship. Each tutor was asked to self-evaluate through a 1–6 scale the activation of a list of different behavior during the course. These behaviors are the "translation" of e-tutor's tasks and different tasks are traced to the correspondent function. In Table 5 we present the average score of each task in the three contexts and the general value.

In this contribution we cannot detail each element, we just underline that:

- more differences among context impact on: time and deadline adjustment, data management, community's organization and management, motivation and engagement support, promoted output (digital artifacts) both internally and externally, troubleshooting and content clarification, finding additional contents, testing and monitoring technology, assessment and feedback on content and activities, data analysis. This depends on tutor's job description;
- technical support varies according to target's digital competences and previous experience of e-learning;
- giving information about the course, followed by course design and launching, guiding, prompting and regulating communication are the most frequent tasks. Less in the Blended Learning context, were the Project Manager is included in the staff as course designer;
- low activation in activities' design and support and personalization of group learning as training contract management in the E-learning context.

This outcome was discussed with e-tutors. It was used to analyse the self-description of tutorship and reflect on it looking at the course design and at the job description (individual level) and to reflect on unexpected results as lack of competences or professional needs and to plan formative sessions (group level).

Recovering Denis [1], to questioning this data we can see that:

- troubleshooting and content clarification are central tasks in e-learning because e-tutor is also a content expert, closer to an e-teacher; it is peripheral in blended learning because e-tutor is asked to be closer to e-moderator;
- finding additional contents is central in blended learning due to his strategic role in supporting group work and method of study of the students;
- assessment and feedback on content and activities are requested by staff and not as a duty toward students;
- time and deadline adjustment are not requested in e-learning context because it is an "intensive course". Also Community's organization and management are not an expected task due to the small groups that tutor have to tutee;
- in MOOCs a peripheral roles deal with identification of technological solutions to meet needs, data management, activity design, support and personalization of group learning, troubleshooting and content clarification, finding additional content, supervision and monitoring the course, assessment and feedback on content and activities,

Table 5. Results from the self-report (mean)

Functions	Tasks	MOOC	Blended learning	E-learning	General
Technological	Course design (1.1, 1.2)[a]	5,6	5,0	4,3	4,6
	Technical support (1.5)	4,6	4,0	3,3	4,1
	Identification of technological solutions to meet needs (1.4)	2,8	3,0	4,0	3,2
	Data management (1.3)	2,0	4,5	1,7	2,4
Organizational	Time and deadline adjustment (2.4, 2.5)	5,4	1,0	1,7	3,5
	Activities' design (2.1)	2,0	1,0	2,3	1,9
	Training contract management (2.2)	3,4	3,0	1,0	2,6
	Community's organization and management (2.7)	3,6	5,5	2,0	3,5
	Giving information about the course (2.3)	4,8	5,5	4,0	4,7
	Support and personalization of group learning (2.6)	1,0	1,0	1,0	1,0
Social	Launching, guiding, prompting and regulating communication (3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.6, 3.9)	4,3	4,9	5,0	4,6
	Motivation and engagement support (3.5, 3.7, 3.8, 3.10, 3.11, 3.12, 3.13, 3.14, 3.15)	3,8	3,9	5,5	4,3
	Promote output (digital artifacts) both internally and externally (3.16, 3.17)	2,1	1,0	3,8	2,4

<div align="right">(continued)</div>

Table 5. (*continued*)

Functions	Tasks	MOOC	Blended learning	E-learning	General
Conceptual	Troubleshooting and content clarification (4.1, 4.2)	2,5	1,0	5,8	3,2
	Finding additional contents (4.3)	2,6	4,0	5,0	3,6
	Offering media-educational food for thought (4.4)	2,6	2,0	3,3	2,7
Evaluative	Testing and monitoring technology (5.1, 5.2, 5.3)	3,1	5,2	1,9	3,2
	Supervision and monitoring the course (5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, 5.9)	2,6	4,5	3,8	3,4
	Assessment and feedback on content and activities (5.8, 5.11)	1,6	1	5,7	2,8
	Giving feedback to staff (5.12)	3,8	4,5	4,7	4,2
	Data analysis (5.10)	1,8	4,5	1,7	2,3

[a]Numbers in parentheses represent the item number of the behavior categorized and present in the self-report.

data analysis. This tutorship depends on a job description that requires to be a content expert;

- on the contrary, in Blended context where the focus of e-tutor action is not on the content but on the learning process, we found identification of technological solutions to meet needs, time and deadline adjustment, activities' design, training contract management, support and personalization of group learning, troubleshooting and content clarification, assessment and feedback on content and activities as peripheral;
- in e-learning context, data management, time and deadline adjustment, activities' design, training contract management, community's organization and management are not central but ask for a professional development in managing community of practice, in supporting and personalizing group learning, in testing and monitoring technology, in data analysis.

Analyzing the data over time from 2006 [27] to nowadays, we can evidence that:

- technological function becomes relevant due to learning analytics and the evolution of Learning Management Systems. It's necessary to reflect on the relationship between informal learning and digital media;
- organizational and social functions should face with digital communication (horizontal dimension, peering, importance of the community, micro-leaning, co-creation of content and new-visibility);
- conceptual function should integrate finding additional contents and offers media-educational food for thought. Information Literacy and Media Literacy should be part of tutorship;
- e-valuation [29] asks e-tutor to be able to observe a community at work, to provide feedback, to test tools, to read, understand and use Learning Analytics.

Data show a change in tutorship functions and their development during the course concerning different contexts. The cycle of tutorship functions developed in 2006 [27] is still valid for blended and e-learning courses but not for MOOC due to community's dimension. This element needs to be investigated further (Fig. 1).
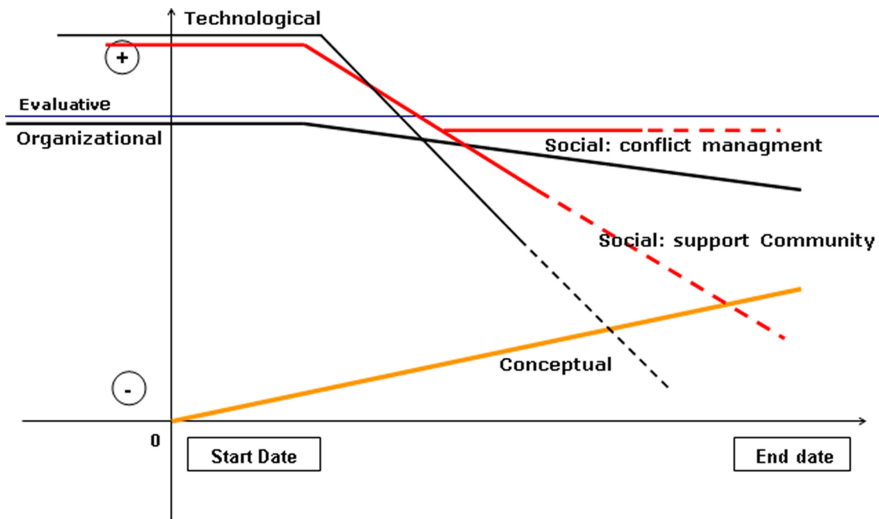

Fig. 1. Cycle of tutorship functions [22]

The other set of data that help to analyse "tutorshape" came from discussion board analysis.

As the Table 6 shows, we need to move from a tutorship guided by e-tivity to activity, where communication strategy is based on promoting and supporting engagement and bridging.

Table 6. Results from discussion board analysis (percentage)

	Access and Motivation		Online Socialisation		Information Exchange		Knowledge Construction		Development	
	Setting up system and accessing	Welcoming and Encouraging	Sending and Receiving Messages	Familiarizing and providing bridges between cultural, social and learning environments	Searching personalizing software	Facilitating task and supporting use of learning materials	Conferencing	Facilitating process	Providing links outside closed conferences	Supporting responding
3-6-9-12	24,89	50,67	2,22	2,67	0,00	8,89	0,00	2,67	0,00	0,89
P&M	26,09	61,96	3,26	3,26	0,00	5,43	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Cyber	26,37	53,85	3,30	3,30	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
EAS 1	1,94	19,61	2,91	2,72	0,00	0,19	0,00	71,07	0,00	0,00
Edudig	47,62	38,69	2,98	2,38	0,00	7,14	0,00	1,19	0,00	0,00

3.3 E-Tutor's Kit: Monitoring the Asynchronous Communication

This final section contains some reflections gained during the experimentation of a specific monitoring tool throughout the first year of activation of the Master's Degree "Business management and consulting".

As seen in Sect. 2, a monitoring grid of incoming and outgoing email between e-tutor and students was implemented. Thanks to a prompt data entry work, the visualization of messages distribution, through pre-set tables and graphics, allowed the acknowledgment of particular courses, themes or situations that act as "points of accumulation" of interest and attention. The number of emails sent by each student was also counted. These data (especially if very low or very high, i.e. no email received or high number of emails received) and the tracking of the platform allowed the e-tutor to act more effectively its evaluative function.

This tool supported in fact the e-tutor's autonomy in evidence-based decision making, helping him to formulate new announcements or clearer messages towards the individual, the small group or the Community, to create supplemental materials (tutorials, guidelines), organize Webinar on specific issues or contact a specific student by phone. Furthermore, it is useful for those situations that fall outside the e-tutor's area of competence and need to be reported to the staff.

At the same time, during the development of the course and in line with the course work plan, the e-tutor built up a tool kit made of scripts, i.e. templates of messages useful in the different stages of training, guidelines, tutorial, FAQs. Several scripts can be defined before the courses start; many others, however, must be imagined as the exchange of messages with the participants becomes more frequent and intense. The scripts must be results of self-reflection on the personal communicative style.

Certainly, as you can imagine, a significant variable is represented by the e-tutor's experience and skills. The e-tutor must take care of his tool kit, updating it constantly, experience after experience.

While in the e-learning courses the "beating heart" of learning were the forums, in which all the members participated, in the MOOCs many contacts took place privately via email. We are planning to propose this tool also to the e-tutors of the MOOCs, to support reflexivity and a more systematic approach to communication.

4   Conclusions

Considering this background, we are glad to define some elements on which we believe it is important to focus, for institutions implied in education and for research:

- the e-tutor as a professional figure and his/her training: it is of fundamental importance to prepare specific training courses with particular attention to methods and tools for managing communication, teaching and learning mediated by digital tools [30]. The construction of skills could be supported by forms of mentorship making it possible to model practices and stimulate reflexivity [31, 32]; no less important is the management of the tutorship in a team in order to actively exchange spaces between peers by co-building toolkits with colleagues;
- technological development: Learning Analytics are usually functional to the evaluation process or to guide the teaching function. It is necessary to invest in the development of a dashboard that supports the work of the e-tutors (thanks to the adoption of a visual format, and to the alert settings, to the possibility of passing from the macro dimension to a micro dimension) and that it is customizable in relation to the training contexts;
- research: if on the one hand it is necessary to invest to find new indicators useful for the development of the dashboard, another interesting research area is represented by the investigation on the methods of interaction between intelligent agents (chatbots) with human communication. We can say that the five functions of e-tutoring take place on two levels, one of a management-informative nature and one critical-reflective. If the first level could be managed by intelligent systems powered by the tutor, the second necessarily requires the e-tutor to take charge. At the moment, the AI systems are not able to put in place the relational quality of the human being, his ability to decode and interpret messages.

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