SPLITTING TUTOR ROLES: SUPPORTING ONLINE-LEARNERS WITH GROUP TUTORS AND SUBJECT TUTORS

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1 Introduction

Student support has (at least) to ensure group well-being and to provide help on the subject matter. In the typical university context a single teacher or tutor fulfils both roles. In a distance education context student support has to fulfil even more tasks.

Especially in distance learning programs there is the risk of students feeling isolated, a lack of self-directions and management, and eventual decreases in motivation levels (Abrami and Bures 1996). This sense of isolation is linked with failing academic achievement (Booher and Seiler 1982), and negative attitudes and overall dissatisfaction with the learning experience (Thompson, 1990). Thus, according to Moore and Keearsley (1996), the level of interaction and support are the most important factors to online student attrition and to avoid that students may drop out of an online program. This point of view is also supported by Tinto's (1997) model of institutional departure which says that student persistence is strongly predicted by their degree of academy integration (e.g. performance, academic self-esteem, identity as a student, etc.) and social integration (e.g. personal interaction, connection to academic community, etc.).

High levels of interaction and support can be offered by different role models of student support. The aim of this paper is to point out a split-role-tutor concept which allows an individualized and personalized student support and which provides "an environment where students feel at home, where they feel valued, and which they find manageable" (Tait 2000, p. 289). Further we will outline the application of the split-role-tutor concept in our online master degree programe[1].

2 Meaning of Learner Support in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

A decade ago Sewart (1993) claimed that student support must acknowledge and respond to the "almost infinite" needs and differences of its clients (p. 11). To meet the expectation of Sewart we will underlie the understanding of learner support by the definition of Thorpe (2001) who defines learner support "as all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process" (p. 109).

Therefore the primary functions of learner support services for students in distance education settings are, according to Tait (2000), the following (p. 289):

1. *Cognitive*: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course material and learning resources for individual students.

2. *Affective*: providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment, and enhances self-esteem; and

3. *Systematic*: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly.

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[1] „Master of Arts in Educational Media": a four semester-distance education program of University of Duisburg-Essen, organized by Duisburg Learning Lab (see http://online-campus.net)

Those three categories lead over to the *split-role-tutor concept*. As the split-role-tutor concept suggests various student supporter roles, each role is responsible for another support function, entirely in terms of Tait (2000).

Further the split-role tutor concept offers the opportunity to meet the following three interrelated elements (Thorpe 2001) which enhance the student's satisfaction during the online learning process:

1. *Identity*. The learner interacts with the learner support services personnel on a one-to-one basis. As the tutor knows the learners in person, the conversation between tutor and learner can be much personal.

2. *Individualization*. The interaction between the learner and the tutor is individualized, based on the specific needs, concerns and goals of the learner.

3. *Interpersonal interaction.* The interaction between learner and tutor is mutual and reciprocal. Goals are learning and performance rather than simply information delivery.

In a distance learner support services environment, the elements and functions mentioned above can be realized through the split-role-tutor concept.

3 The split-tutor-concept: Group and Subject Tutor

The split-tutor-concept classifies the different support functions in various tutoring roles. There are two main tutoring roles: the group and the subject tutor. If the students have technical or administrative questions or problems they get individual support in those domains.

In the following paragraphs we describe the split-tutor-concept on the basis of our Master program Educational Media.

3.1 Group tutor

The group tutor is the primary contact person for all organizational questions and questions concerning the communication and motivation of students in learning groups. In our online Master program, a learning group has five to seven members; therefore, the tutoring is rather intensive.

At the first face-to-face (FTF) meeting, the students build learning groups and choose a group tutor. During the FTF-meeting, the group tutor takes over the following duties:

- *Presentation of the group tutor and the group members:*
  The group tutor presents himself to the group and activates his group members to get to know each other.

- *Finding a name for the group:*
  To strengthen the identification with the group, the group tutor helps the learning group to find an expressive name.

- *Defining rules for the internal communication:*
  To avoid problems in the communication processes, the group tutors develops some rules for the communication processes in cooperation with the learning group members, e.g. tell the tutor, if you are absent on business or on vacation.

- *Introduction of a new software tool:*
  To support the cooperative work the group tutor presents the computer supported cooperative work tool BSCW (Basic Support for Cooperative Work) to the group.

During the online phase, the group tutor is the contact person for problems or needs the students have independently from the content. The group tutor has to hold up the motivation and support her/his students whenever it is necessary. Furthermore, the group tutor moderates online chats which take place regularly. Further the group tutor interferes when any conflicts between the group members or

the learner and the tutor appear which have to be solved. As the group tutor is in general during the whole distance program the same, tutor and students build up a personal relationship which supports the maintenance of motivation and drops the drop-out rates. Defining own group rules, norms and decision making processes is especially important at the beginning of the program and during conflict situations (Berge, 1995; Friedrich and Hesse and Ferber and Heins 2002).

According to notions of our students, the well-being in the own learning group is an essential aspect which leads to the satisfaction of the student program.

3.2 The subject tutor

The subject tutor is responsible for any concerns belonging to the subject, the tutor is specialized on. Normally, the subject tutor is responsible for one to two subjects. Every subject, e.g. communication or technique, consists of six different learning units.

The duties of a subject tutor are the following:

- *Formulate the assignments for the different learning materials:*
  The assignments differ between single assignments and group assignments. As the students get the assignments for their own, the subject tutor has to create the assignments in this way that there is no misunderstanding possible.

- *Correct the assignments and give feedback:*
  The subject tutor is responsible for correcting the assignments belonging to the subject, the tutor is specialized on, and also to give feedback to the student. If the students answered the questions of a learning unit right, he has to give credits on the assignments. Further the subject tutor has to ensure the learning progresses (Grabe and Nuebel and Kerres, 2004).

- *Contact to the author of the learning material:*
  As the content is in general not written by the subject tutor himself, he interacts with the author while (s) he is writing on the material. It is the duty of the subject tutor to define and control the contents.

Thus the responsibilities of a subject tutor can be distinguished in two phases: first the work on the contents before making them available to the student and second the support of the students while they are working with the material.

4 Communication between tutor and students

The communication between group tutors and students is based on synchronous and asynchronous tools. Synchronous events are helpful to support the social well-being of the learners. Thus, the learning group meets the group tutor in regular intervals in online *chat*s. The groups either discusses organizational questions, e.g. who coordinates the next group assignment, questions concerning the latest studying material or just talk with each other.

Another way to communicate between the learning group and group tutor is a *group forum[2]*. Each learning group owns its private forum where they can discuss different topics. In most cases it is used to answer group assignments. But it also includes topics, e.g. about literature, useful links or conferences. All threads are moderated by the group tutor.

Next to forum and chat, *E-Mail* is another very important communication tool between group tutor and learning group.

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[2] Chat and forum give the students also the opportunity to interact and help from student-to-student. According to Fahy (2003) support potentially benefits if instructors encourage students to engage in mutually supportive collaborative interactions.

For the communication processes between the subject tutor and the students, *E-Mail* is the tool which is used most, especially to give feedback to the assignments. If the subject tutor has to correct a group assignment (s) he has also to look into the *learning group forum* to follow and judge the discussions.

The subject tutor and the group tutor communicate with each other, when:

- Problems / concerns arise with one student, e.g. (s) he has not able to answer a question for several times.

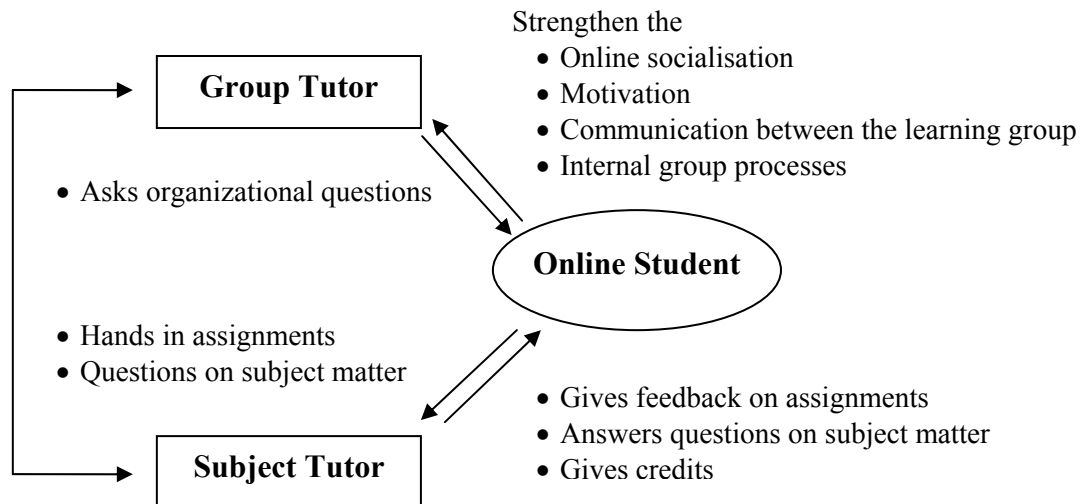- A tutor receives a question from a student which should be answered by the other tutor.

Figure 1: Communication between students and tutors

5 Advantages of different tutor roles

In our experience, the split-role model of tutors is rather easy to handle for our students. As the group tutor gets to know his students best, (s) he is able to step in if either a problem within the group or personal problem arises. The members of the learning group can address all questions and problem to a group tutor. If the question is concerning certain content, the group tutor would forward the question to the subject tutor. The students mentioned the allocation of clear responsibilities as very helpful.

The advantage of having different subject tutors is obvious: (S) He is deep into the content and is able to answer questions on the subject matter rather easily and right. Furthermore, the evaluation of the answers of few experts allows a consistent feedback over learning groups. Having worked for one semester with this model, our results show that students as well as tutors are very pleased with the split-role model of tutoring.

With this model we found an efficient alternative to the classical support model of universities which also allows the cognitive, affective and systematic support of the online student. The special advantage seems to be the chance to build up a more intensive relationship to the distance learner which is especially important at a study program that goes over several semesters.

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