THE TUTORSHIP FUNCTION: LIFELONG LEARNING AND TRANSITION PATHS

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Abstract

Over the years, the role and function of the tutor is changed. The meaning of the term tutor saw the phasing out of security and protection sense to highlight a formative and educational significance. The tutor, metaphorically, acts a bit as "a modern Charon" ferries subjects-in-training in the transition paths: the analysis of the characteristics and competences, the identification of needs, the design of personal paths or orientation initial and ongoing.

This seems, at a glance, to offer a multifaceted meaning of the term. Tutor is a person able to guide the subject-in-training in the path of the construction of knowledge and competences. At the same time, the tutor is a counsellor that "take care of" and a coach that lead people to go forward.

Keywords

Tutorship, Orientation, Transition Paths, Ongoing Process, Competences and Skills

1. The Tutor: The Change in Meaning Over Time

The word mentor originates from the Latin tutari (hence the word tueri = protect, defend, guard) and can be found in several areas: in botany it indicates a support tool and offers support

for plants in order to direct their growth and in orthopaedic practice it indicates the support for an injured limb.

The term, therefore, in different fields, maintains this strong emphasis on the meaning of protection and custody rather than any dangers or fragility; see – in a last glance – that whose characteristics (age, psychological, social, cultural) determine a condition of "not full/not enough autonomy" rather than "tasks/activities" required by the context/situation in which it is inserted.

The distinctive features of a tutor seem so be to exercise a function of help - albeit transient in terms of subject development - until full autonomy is achieved (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Vigotskij, 1934; Piaget, 1932).

The meaning of the term tutor who has been claiming he saw the phasing out of security and protection sense to highlight a formative and educational significance.

Subsequently, starting from the Eighties, especially with the spread of learning and distance learning systems, the figure of the tutor emerges as the person responsible for motivating the learner, facilitating teaching and consolidating learning.

To understand the meaning of the term and its evolution in the training process we can resort to the definitions found in some thesauri.

The term appears for the first time in 1974 in Princeton Eric - the Educational Resources Information Centre - referring to «people, often privately, they are responsible for teaching a particular matter to individuals or small groups».

Since the Nineties, the term has seen a semantic evolution that we can highlight from the definitions in another thesaurus: that of the Centre (1990) and the European Year of Education (1991). In either the focus shifts from the person to the functions exercised, the purpose and the methods.

In the first thesaurus, the function of the tutor is related to individualized training and methods of learning; the second is defined as «educational assistance that developed within the custom report, it aims to help the student to take responsibility for his own formation».

In the European Education Thesaurus, the term "tutor training" was, also introduced. It is thus a characteristic of the presence of a specific person, «someone other than the teacher holder, responsible for following the development of the training of young people».

From the definitions, it is clear that a new meaning characterizes the term. Consequently, we need to think of the tutor as holding a specific professional role, other than that of teacher.

In the Dictionary of Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (1996) the tutor in a training context is defined as a:«Professional who takes care of supporting the work of a student during the internship or, in the case of job training, to coordinate work activities with training activities. Figure mediating between business and schools, the role of the tutor is expressed both in a direct relationship with the student (of support, guidance, orientation) is in a relationship with the leading figures of the student himself (employer work, parents, social worker) » (Bertolini, 1996, p. 679).

Finally, in the Dictionary of Education (1997), the term tutor emphasizes the relationship between the tutor and the learner:«In language teaching, the tutor indicates the figure and the role of those who argue in a personalized way in terms of student learning, supporting the educational work of the teacher» (Prellezo, Nanni &Malizia, 1997, p. 1143).

While the latter engages with the entire class, «the tutor helps individual students in learning and overcoming difficulties in adapting generally. According to individual needs, he revises their written work, suggests the most effective methods of learning, supports them in times of crisis and helps them in school decisions and existential» (ivi, p. 1144).

From this brief overview, it is possible to underline that the role and meaning of the tutor has changed over time. It is also clear that the concept of "facilitator" (Davis et. alii, 1992; Rogers, 1951) has remained over time, although the emphasis is more on achieving learning objectives. It has been gradually lost any connotation of "protection", meaning the balance of the "dependency" and "subordination" of mentoring compared to the tutor in relation to decisions, expectations and goals.

Understood as being a facilitator of the learning process, the tutor implements advocacy and supports the learner in order to encourage reflective practice and metacognition.

The aid, care and, support provided are designed to promote the acquisition of autonomy and independent development and not to encourage the learner to remain in a situation of dependence and subordination.

«Man is like a tree. If you put yourself in front of a tree and look at the clock to see if it grows and how grown up it is, you will not see anything. Take care for him at all times, free him from the superfluous and keep it clean [...] and it will begin [...] to grow. The same applies to humans: the only thing he needs is to overcome obstacles and snares, and he will develop and grow. But it is wrong to examine him at any one time to find out how grown up he is» (Buber, 1947, p. 63).

We must however, point out that the aim of facilitating learning should be a function shared by the various figures / roles who work in a training environment in order to create a genuine "tutorial system".

For tutorial system referenced to a system/organizational context it has to be structured so as to ensure that each role/function carries on the business/function within a unified design - as well as providing the shared characteristics of a true "learning community" (Cox, 2002; Senge, 2000; Brown and Campione, 1990).

2. Need of tutorship: between opportunities and risks

The current absence of mentoring as a latent condition associated with the "casualization" of social relations (Bauman, 2005, 2000) has increased the need to "cure" people. This has become almost a social necessity.

The historical-cultural-social and economic contexts within which we live, are often difficult to "decipher", in that they are characterized by the fluidity of elements and references - previously considered firm and solid - that produce disorientation and the inability to clearly delineate and define a representation of themselves and that of future routes (Banks, 2006; ILO, 2004; Bauman, 2003).

This instability, in addition to being marked as a figure of our time, characterizes relationships, situations and processes (not least the work) that all appear in various ways and from different points of view, insecure, unstable, temporary, subject to revocation, uncertain, without warranty of life, fleeting or short.

In addition, the weakening of some social institutions (family, company, group of peers, communities, groups and parties, ...), the exercise of the function of holding onto the "loss of the father" (Recalcati, 2011; McLanahan, Sigle-Rushton, 2002, Zoja, 2003), the weakening of the role of mentoring that is latent and widespread and is carried out by different figures (parents, teachers, grandparents, friends, ...).

This condition has made necessary to set up and formalize "figures tutorial", that are able to make up for these losses and put themselves like a "social antidote".

Given these changes, the gradual but steady blossoming of a wide variety of tutors has emerged: online tutor, tutor for alternating training, tutors for transitions, classroom tutor, class tutor, personal tutor, tutor trainers, tutors for students, ... (Adler, 1998).

3. The tutor as an educational and formative figure

Over the years, important legislation supports the role and function of the tutor. National legislation has highlighted both the centrality of the student in the teaching-learning process and the importance of the functions of "accompaniment" and "orientation"on the part of the tutor. These are of fundamental importance in the following order:

- Increase the effectiveness of teaching;

- Reduce the number of dropouts;

- Stimulate the active participation of students in the learning process;

- Support the students' cultural and professional training.

The central role of the tutor appears at different times and stages of life. A study prepared by the CRUI (AA. VV., 1995) has identified and distinguished the different stages / phases of life (from school to university and beyond). It also illustrates the specific functions (figure 1):

- Support in the transition from high school to college;

- Orientation in terms of university entrance - which often results in information provision with regard to the services, activities and characteristics of the university;

- Ongoing one-to –one tutoring to accompany and support students during their studies;

- Orientation to a profession, aimed at promoting the self-assessment in terms of the skills and competencies of the student in order to support the establishment and development of a professional profile.
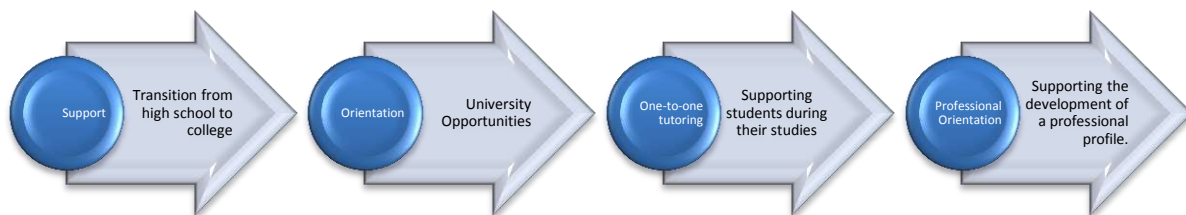

Figure 1: *The tutor functions: from school to university and beyond*

The different tasks and activities of the tutors are a pedagogical practice complex, complementary to the process of teaching learning, with the specific function to facilitate the growth and professional training of the subject.

A quick answer is that the function - more than the figure - of the tutor is complex, the margins are not always clearly defined, it is placed in an environment of sharing/mingling with the process of teaching/learning and which also has a support function in terms of cognitive, affective and relationships within the education and training process.

The report tutorial is a part of a vision of educating as "taking care". In this sense, the tutor can support «the learner that lives the moments of transition from the familiar to the new, supporting its effort to think and to seek horizons capable of doing as a compass to the new in seeking new horizons» (Mortari, 2002, p.20).

The function of the tutor represents, therefore, a training when you configure as support and guidance in situations/transitional activities.To fully understand the complexity and, scope of this statement we can reflect on the nomenclature of professions proposed by ISTAT[1].

The document proposes different figures such as educational and vocational guidance counsellors, providers of expert information for young people, regional expert careers guidance personnel, guidance counsellors for graduate studies, guidance counsellors for high schools and, school guidance counsellor.

All these figures fall within the macro-category of "councillors' orientation" as the following suggest:

«The occupations included in this unit evaluating the abilities and propensities of individuals, as information on the structure and dynamics of the labour market and offer education and training, assisting them in identifying the most suitable channels for developmental, personal, social, educational and professional growth».

The tutor therefore is, fully embedded in the discourse of lifelong learning as it deals with support of parties-in-training at different stages of life. Through such features as support action for the recognition of skills, competencies and training needs; information about structures and dynamics of the contexts; accompaniment and help in drawing up development plans for personal, social, educational and professional development; care in the implementation of

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[1]http://cp2011.istat.it/

reflective practices with regard to experiences carried out. All these practices can subscribe to the whole of the tripartite developmental process of orientation-warmth-tutoring.

This seems, at a glance, to offer a profound sense of the tutor: a figure able to incorporate the specific functions of the mentor (who accompanies and guides the subject-in-training in the path of the construction of knowledge) and those of the counsellor (through the activities/actions of "taking care of"), up to that of coach (emphasizing the leading role).

4. The tutor in a university context

The universities of several foreign countries have had tutors for some time. In Italy there is law No. 341/1990 "Reform of university teaching" which recognizes tutoring activities. Specifically, Article 13, states:

«Mentoring is aimed at guiding and assisting students throughout the course of studies, to make them active participants in the educational process, to remove obstacles to successful attendance of courses, including initiatives that relate to the attitudes and needs of the individual. Mentoring services collaborate with organizations to support the right of the individual to education, and with the representatives of the students, contribute to the overall requirements for the education of students and to ensure their participation in university activities».

In terms of responsibilities and tasks, Article 12 states:

«Also the institutional task of professors and researchers is to drive the process of the cultural development of the student as provided by the mentoring system».

Therefore,professors and researchers have to direct and to assist students during the course of their studies. They have to remove any obstacles that prevent successful attendance to the courses, and which limit the active participation of students.

Universities are, sometimes planned in such a way that sometimes peer tutoring experiences that involve older students than freshmen are involved. In this case, the function should involve activating the mutual support between different members of the university community, thus emphasizing a collaborative spirit that, in turn, could help to develop more open attitudes among students and get them to "think critically" (Halpern, 2003, Fischer, 2001, Gokhale, 1995).

In order to investigate and understand the full meaning of the university tutor as a set/educational function, we can start from the analysis of what we can identify as specific functions:

- Function of welcome and assistance;

- Boundary function or service;

- Processing function;

- Function of guidance and support.

The function of welcome and assistance. This relates to the host function aspects of providing information regarding the functioning, services, activities and characteristics of the university. The aim is to ensure a more effective and productive use of the years at university. After the introduction and acceptance of the university context, it quickly becomes an essential aspect of the assistance to study. In the transition from high school to university, many students, in fact, encounter difficulties of orientation and adjustment to the methodology of the study and to the workload.

The boundary function relates to the context of the creation of a setting that allows the tutor and the student to facilitate, promote and stimulate the process of teaching and learning. Especially in the early stages, in fact, students have to manage feelings of confusion, uncertainty, waiting, fear and discovery with regard to what is new. It is important then, that the tutor handles the situation through the preparation and the "cure" of a setting which able to deliver and manage these feelings.

The function of the process aimsto the creation and development of connections between the various actors and stakeholders. In terms of the process of learning, the tutor, by analysing individual needs, makes available or obtainable the necessary materials and resources, together with support actions for ongoing monitoring and for promoting actions in terms of critical thinking and metacognition.

The focus is on the social process through which we build knowledge. This process takes place through participation in a social community that allows tutoring in the subject. It also allows the acquisition and development of values and norms/rules socially shared.
Through the activities of/with tutors, students "get familiar" with the values, rules, practices and routines of the professional context - particularly through the use of internship.
In this sense, we can say that the tutor encourages the development of skills and training in the context of the student's future job profile.

The theoretical concepts of "legitimate peripheral participation" and "situated learning" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) represent and summarize effectively what happens in the process of

"socialization" to the role/function, when the subject "novice" is "taken over" and "accompanied", "backed" or "helped "in their path by the tutor.

To further support, the description of the process the concept of apprenticeship is also useful. According to Lave and Wenger, gradual learning of expert competence bases on a social process, and as the apprentice learns through participation in practice, the more s/he forms as a person and becomes part of a community.

The function of support and guidance concerns the coaching and monitoring as part of the learning process in order to facilitate the achievement of the learning objectives. In this context, the support consists in an individualized relationship between the tutor and the student to identify, recognize and enhance the resources and potential of the subject (Scandella, 2007, 1995). In addition, it adds to the promotion and development of the professional profile.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the function of the tutor is supporting and sustaining people in:

- Reflection;
- Expression of their potential;
- Development of connections;
- Acquisition and development of awareness and skills;
- Growth in independence;
- Development of metacognitive and reflexive competence;
- Development of critical thinking and the ability to learn how to learn;
- Becoming part of the community and professional practice.

The pedagogical dimension of the action of the tutor is, therefore, in support and stimulus with regard to a process, which operates through the lives and stories of different people and different subjects. It a process of individual transition that is expressed in community / collective. The tutor, metaphorically, acts as "a modern Charon" ferries subjects-in-training in the transition paths. In details the tutor realized the following functions: the analysis of the characteristics, resources and skills input, the identification of training needs, the design of personalized programs or individualized orientation initial and ongoing, according to the monitoring and evaluation of prevention, supervision, "reflective", to the accompaniment "outgoing" and support the inclusion in the employment context".

As future developments, it could be possible to consider the tutor as "link" between university and labour market. Hence, the University expects to get closer to the business world, to speak with it, and share a common values and vision. This aims to get a true understanding of what is required of today's generation to become tomorrow's workers (Faraz Naim, Lenka U., 2015).

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