

# **EDEN 2018 ANNUAL Conference**

## **Exploring the Micro, Meso and Macro**

Navigating between dimensions in the digital learning  
landscape

EDEN 2018 Annual Conference

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### **CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**

Edited by

Airina Volungeviciene, András Szűcs

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## Introduction

The demand for people with new, enhanced skills is growing. The volume of information produced and shared in all fields is overwhelming. Building the data economy became part of the EU Digital Single Market. Powerful and sophisticated ICT is part of everyday life, and the world of learning is not an exception. Pressure is on all players of the online education community to keep up with new learning solutions, and better supply the skills currently demanded by growing economies.

Open Education continues its success, providing radical advances in knowledge acquisition, sharing, distribution, and improving business models. Digital credentials and open badges are the new currencies which are beginning to transform the economic models in education.

Social and economic tensions continue to raise the issues of scalability, the micro-credentialling of education, training and skill development processes. Practitioners and stakeholders are eagerly seeking right approaches to providing learning opportunities, and many scholars are researching holistic answers.

Micro, meso and macro aspects provide an interesting range of lenses for considering the problem. These aspects may be applied in a general sense, distinguishing between the learning of individuals, learning at the institutional or group levels through a meso lens, and the learning of organizations or societies directed through policies through the macro lens.

Navigating these dimensions are the reshaping of digital pedagogy and online instructional design; the social elements including digital societal mechanisms and the position of the individual in our new era. We have need of systematic awareness and research in the critical era of sustainable socio-cultural aspects as they relate to learning.

European Union initiatives emphasize solutions to emerging needs and seek to improve competitiveness and professional development; enhance cross-sectional skills; and fuel the engines of social innovation – creativity, entrepreneurship, critical thinking and problem solving.

The EDEN 2018 Genova Conference aims to respond to contemporary needs by:

- tracking and demonstrating evidence about the mechanisms and value chains across micro-, meso- and macro-learning
- exploiting the socio-cultural specifics related to the granularity of learning
- digging deeper into finding viable, achievable and scalable solutions
- learning more about didactical design through peer learning and scholarly observation
- discussing structural and operational questions of collaborative - social technologies

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## ONLINE TUTORING TO ENHANCE UNIVERSITY SUCCESS

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### Abstract

This paper presents an experimental model of online tutoring designed and developed by the research group of the University of Turin, that aims at reducing the number of students starting the second academic year with a low number of passed exams, by helping students with the lessons they find more difficult. The Project, called TutoratoOnline, offers students online support in their study through synchronous and asynchronous tutoring. The service is developed through a Moodle platform integrated with a web conference service. An example of this is the online tutoring experience of a French course for which many students have signed up and which has met with great success. Through this example, the proposed model and the key strengths of an online tutoring will be analysed.

### Introduction

In the Italian higher education system, the tutoring was introduced together with the orientation in the universities in 1990 with the Reform of the University Didactic Ordinances (Law 341, art.13), which defines the general aims of tutoring actions. As explained in the official documents of the Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities (CRUI, 1995, Michelon, 2000), each university should take care of the activities of incoming orientation, reception and tutoring, accompanying students through the entire course of studies (Giuliani, Moretti, & Morini, 2016). The didactic autonomy allows each University to organize their own tutoring model according to their needs and possibilities; nonetheless, all the interventions have some common aims: giving information and advice to better address the course of study, preparing paths for the recovery of learning gaps, providing assistance for the preparation of the thesis. The tutoring involves a heterogeneous set of actions that have the task of supporting students, upon entering the University and during their academic life, implementing the resources available to face possible difficulties in each phase of the training process; it must also have the purpose of removing obstacles to a profitable attendance of courses, also through initiatives related to the attitudes and needs of individuals.

In the academic year 2016/2017 the University of Turin enhanced the existing tutoring activities (disciplinary tutoring in attendance, reception activities for first year students, study assistance for enrolled students, advice on the training offer and study plans, support in finding information on international mobility) offering students an online tutoring service. The main objective of this Project, called "TutoratoOnline", is to reduce the number of students starting the second academic year with a low number of exams passed, helping students in the lessons

in which they can find more difficulties. Ten bachelors of the University joined the Project by offering the service for one or more courses, chosen among those that were found to be more difficult. Our research group at the University of Turin has been involved in the design of an effective online tutoring model that offers students online study support through synchronous and asynchronous activities, and in the development of the model using a Moodle platform (available at the following link: <http://tutoratonline.orientamento.unito.it/>) integrated with a web conference tool (through which the tutor has the possibility to share the screen of his PC and the audio with the participants). This integrated platform was developed by the University of Turin (Baltoni, et al., 2011).

This article presents the online tutoring model designed and developed through the platform and, as an example, the online tutoring experience of a French course to which many students have enrolled and which has met with considerable success.

### **State of the art**

The tutoring services can use various teaching strategies and there are more and more universities that dedicate interest and funds to the structuring of specific tutoring services, convinced that those supporting actions which are tailored on the specific needs of each student can “provide an important contribution to guarantee the effectiveness and equity of the higher education system and, at the same time, respect for the autonomy of the individual” (Torre, 2006). Although university tutoring services are principally aimed at freshman students and provide training and educational support, the guidelines differ according to the specific socio-cultural background of reference. In the Anglo-Saxon reality, the reference model is that of pastoral care, theorized by Marland and Gill (1974). According to the author, the centre of the tutor’s interest must be the tutee, which must be monitored throughout the training process and helped with the job placement, enhancing their personal needs and interests. This model requires that a professor plays the role of tutor, so that it is guaranteed that the tutor is qualified to intervene on questions of didactic nature. However, in the Anglo-Saxon reality there is no shortage of tutoring experiences that leverage the practice of peer tutoring (Falchikov, 2001). Different is the tutoring approach used in the Central European tradition, which pays particular attention to the planning of orientation and training interventions as well as to the didactic aspects. In this context the space to perform a tutorial function is left to the students, whose progress is encouraged through designing and supporting activities for their classmates.

Tutorial activities usually involve a number of different activities: modelling appropriate learning behaviours, supporting and developing students’ learning by introducing ideas and insights, questioning and probing students’ responses, and focusing the discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills (Ferreira, 2013). Tutors need to engage in, and encourage, “social” activities with their students. This includes creating a friendly, informal environment necessary for successful academic learning, as well as acknowledging student’s contributions and promoting collaborative work. Tutors also have a managerial role in setting the agenda and planning the tutoring sessions. This includes a variety of tasks such as introducing the learning group, establishing the expected outcomes, introducing and setting tasks, focusing and re-



focusing the discussions, setting the pace and managing the time, summarizing the outcomes, closing the discussions or conferences. Tutoring in higher education cannot be narrowly defined as the concept may change from institution to institution, and it can be implemented following a myriad of models. Independently from the case, the main objective of tutoring is to promote and enhance the overall development of the student. It is thus an important component of graduate and post-graduate programs as it provides students with the opportunity to seek help on a one-to-one basis or in a small group setting. In this way the tutor not only helps with academic work, but also becomes a mentor, a friend and a role model.

### ***The online tutoring***

Historically, online tutoring began with emailing. In this format, a student sent a question to the tutor with the expectation that the return email would contain “the answer”. Instead, what often happened was a disconnection: the tutor, being a good guide, sent back a Socratic answer with more questioning prompts; the student, expecting “the answer”, became frustrated. Although the student may expect a give and take interaction in a face-to-face tutoring session, the email format suggested to the student that the question should be answered with a direct answer. As new tools have been made available, there has been an emergence of new models, both in asynchronous and synchronous formats. The evolution of online tutoring shows that success does not merely depend on the tool selected, but also on the development of an appropriate culture for online tutoring, an understanding of the process and parameters involved (Turrentine & MacDonald, 2006). It is recommendable trying to encourage the students as much as possible because they often tend to feel quite lost, alone and discouraged. Let them know that the online procedure is new and will get easier. Students using a synchronous tutoring system may need an overview of the tool itself before participating in the online tutoring environment, so that it is simple to use. The format of online communication (no matter how transparent the tutor attempts to make the session) requires that everything be simple to understand. Best practices of face-to-face tutoring in Socratic mode also apply to online tutoring. However, some students resist the guided discovery learning process: it’s important to communicate to the student why the tutor is doing something in a certain way and that it will not be long before they get it on their own.

The use of ICT and in particular networks to support training processes is constantly growing and with them a variety of educational approaches have emerged that sometimes see the network as a great distribution channel of structured teaching material to be used in self-education or other times as a virtual space able to host collaborative learning communities (Trentin, 2003). This is also due to the need to acquire a new culture that considers such practices not so much in antagonism or as an alternative to in-presence training, but rather as a further possibility, especially where traditional approaches to training prove to be less feasible and / or effective. For example, we consider cases where space-time unity becomes a big obstacle to participate in a training event or when e-learning methods prove to be more effective, not because they solve distance problems, but rather because they allow dismounting and separately playing two components of the “space” (I do as much as possible on my own, perhaps assisted

remotely or involved in a learning group) and “time” (when the conditions on their border allow it).

## The model of the online tutoring of the TutoratoOnline Project

The TutoratoOnline Project is conceived to make available to all the students of the University of Turin an entirely online constant support to their studies through the platform. All the students of the University of Torino can access the platform with their UniTo credentials, after which they can check if the teaching they are interested in is on the platform and if so, register for the course. When students enrol in the course, they are asked to respond to a short questionnaire without filling in the contents of the course. The tutoring service offers two types of interventions:

- synchronous: agreeing the day and time with the tutor, students have the possibility to fix an online appointment to have explanations on a specific topic. They can also connect to online tutorials requested by other students to listen to explanations;
- asynchronous: students have the possibility to ask questions and doubts in a forum and to submit writing, exercises or problems and have them corrected.

Through constant support and personalized immediate feedback, we want to support students in acquiring knowledge, developing their skills but also working on other dimensions: increasing self-confidence and motivation towards studying the discipline, facilitate working students (who cannot attend classes) and out-of-school students who fail to achieve their goals. The small gap between the age of tutors and students helps in the action of tutoring and in achieving these objectives since students are much closer in age to the tutors than to the teachers (Giraud et al., 2014). The Project tutors were selected through a call for applications, where only master’s degree candidates could be employed in their respective courses. They received training (about three hours) and they received support on the use of the Moodle learning environment and on the use of the AdobeConnect web conference service, so that they were able to work independently with the students creating real virtual learning communities.

The online tutoring model developed within the TutoratoOnline Project is based on the following fundamental parameters:

- User friendly platform: one of the fundamental aspects considered in the design of the online tutoring model was the need to make it as simple as possible to identify the course of interest on the platform and its navigation. For this reason, we have created: (a) the main homepage of the site where we describe the aims and actions of TutoratoOnline Project, which is displayed when people search the site before logging in with their credentials; (b) a second new homepage which is viewed by all users after login. It explains clearly to students how to find their courses of interest and how to explore the courses on the platform (Figure 1). To create this page we have customized the Moodle DashBoard (formerly known as “My home”) through the html language and we have set it to be the page where users are addressed after the login. All the courses on the platform have the same simple structure: an introduction with an

explanation of how to use the platform, the questionnaires, the “Forum News” (for notices and communications) and the “Forum for questions and doubts” (to ask questions about the platform or the didactics); a section dedicated to the booking calendar; a section dedicated to online meetings and finally a section dedicated to the delivery of the exercises.

- Personalized online meetings: students, through the “Book an online appointment” forum in the booking calendar section, can request a personalized tutoring indicating the day and time and the topic of the lesson (possibly enclosing an explanation file). All course members receive a copy of the forum message via e-mail and in this way they are automatically informed. Finally, the tutor, after scheduling the appointments with students, inserts them into the calendar as a reminder to everyone.
- Immediate evaluation and feedback: students can at any time submit an exercise for correction or judgment or they can write a post to ask a question to the tutor in the “Questions and doubts Forum”. At the time of delivery, the tutor receives a notification via e-mail and (within the next 24 hours) responds to the student with a comment, eventually attaching an explanation file.
- Accessibility: The TutoratoOnline platform of the University of Turin has adopted EasyReading (<http://www.easyreading.it>), a high legibility font. All the resources and activities proposed are written in EasyReading and, consequently, also accessible to students with specific learning disorders.

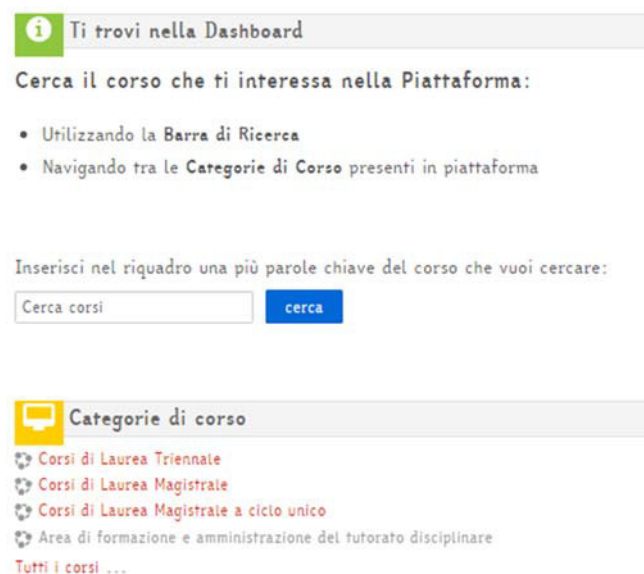


Figure1. Dashboard of the platform TutoratoOnline (home page after the login)

## Results

To understand the effectiveness of the experimental online tutoring model, we have analysed it, according to the parameters proposed, on the “French Language – first year” platform course, to which about 135 students enrolled and which met with great success. The course took place approximately from July 2017 to early February 2018 and it was managed by a single tutor. For the analysis we considered:

- the short entry questionnaire, mandatory for all students, where they were asked: name, surname, course of study, year of registration, if they had already tried to take the exam and how many times;
- an interview to the tutor, in which we asked him how he set up the synchronous and asynchronous tutoring with his students, which activities he felt most effective, his personal opinion on the experience and further observations;
- the Moodle reports about the use of the forums by students, participation to the online meetings, submission of the exercises and response to short texts added by the tutor, in agreement with the teacher, to give further support.;
- an optional final satisfaction questionnaire where we asked the students:
  - if it was easy to find the course “French Language – First Year” within the platform and if the navigation of the same was intuitive.
  - what was their participation in the various activities and which of them was support for the study;
  - if having a tutor available supported them in the preparation of the exam and if they used the online tutoring service in the preparation of the exam;
  - if they passed the exam and if they would like a similar service to be activated for other courses.

The answers to the entry questionnaire show that the majority of students are enrolled in the Degree Course in Linguistic Mediation Sciences (85%) or in the Course of Modern Languages and Literatures (7%). The year of enrolment varies widely: 34% of them are enrolled in third year, 26% in second year, 19% in first year and 21% of students are enrolled in supplementary years. Most students (62%) had already tried to sit the exam, of which 63% once, 28% twice, 5% three times and 4% more than three times. During the interview, the tutor explained that since the “French – First year course” is aimed at first year students, on the platform there are students in French from the first year or the second year who have not yet passed the exam. However, it can also be chosen by third-year students, for example in English, who have to choose one more language to study for only one year. The tutor, a graduate student in languages and a specialist in French, set up tutoring activities reflecting the program of the lecturer, which is divided into two parts: part A (grammar and translation) for which the submission tool and the tests on the platform were very useful, and part B (listening) for which the use of online meetings was fundamental since he was able to carry out real exam simulations. In addition, all online events were held entirely in French, and according to the tutor students felt comfortable when asking about their doubts (perhaps because they did not have the webcam activated but only the microphone) interacting directly in a foreign language.

### ***User friendly platform***

According to the tutor, the navigation of the platform is very intuitive and the choice to insert a second homepage (dashboard) was effective because in this way finding the course of interest is very simple, and only very few students had difficulties in finding the resources within the course (perhaps deriving from inattention in reading the instructions). This opinion is confirmed by the students’ answers to the final questionnaire where the question “Was it easy

to find the course in the platform?” 86% of the students answered “absolutely yes” and the rest “more yes than no” (nobody answered “absolutely no” or “more no than yes”). With the same criterion of answers, we asked if the navigation of the platform was intuitive, and 57% of the students answered “absolutely yes”, 29% “more yes than no” and the rest “more no than yes”.

### ***Personalized online meetings***

According to the tutor, the online meetings were the most useful tutoring activity for students. Initially, he himself scheduled meetings in the calendar to encourage the timidest students to participate and to help them understand the functioning of online tutoring. After that, the students were asked to request appointments through the forum or at the end of an online tutoring if they still needed help. During the interview the tutor reported that up to 24/25 students participated to the online meetings (not always the same ones) and that, to try to involve as many as possible, he tried to schedule the online meetings at times that could suit everyone, for example at the weekends at different times, or at 9 pm (as many if not all are working students) or even during the holidays, because the students wanted to take advantage of the holiday days to practice.

This answer agrees again with the students’ answers in the final questionnaire, where all the students chose online meetings as the most supportive activity (they could choose between “Forum for questions and doubts”, online meetings, delivery of exercises and quizzes). The most significant answers to the question “Why?” were: “Because we could work well with the tutor, asking questions during online appointments if something was not clear”, “To discuss with those who master the French language”, “To have the opportunity to attend an interactive lesson directly from home” and “Because they help practicing in preparation for the exam”.

The analysis of the Moodle logs (Table1) about online meetings confirms the results so far emerged and adds other significant aspects. Table1 shows an overview of the online meetings held throughout the duration of the course (from July 2017 to early February 2018 for a total of 30 weeks).

Table 1: Overview of the online meetings

Total number of online meetings held	103
Average number of online meetings per week	3.4
Total participation in online meeting	527
Average number of connected users	5
Users who participated in at least one tutoring	83

Analysing the number of participants in an online meeting we highlighted that the minimum number of users connected was 1 while the highest number was 29 (especially near the examination session). Figure 2 summarizes the number of participations in online meetings, which consequently became both targeted and personalized interventions and real online lessons. In the case of many connected users, the tutor emphasized the effectiveness of the web conference service which allows to authorize the use of the microphone through the “raising of hands” option.

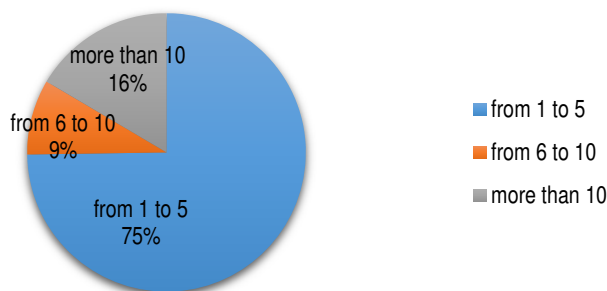


Figure 2. Participation in online meetings

### **Immediate evaluation and feedback**

During the interview the tutor explained that for the part of grammar and translation he inserted some short exercises on the platform, as exam simulations, adding a few lines of theoretical explanation to make sure students read the grammar rule before applying it. According to him, it is essential to recommend to students to work seriously and to insert the exercises from time to time to invite them to work constantly, because procrastinating till the last minute is not effective and because the tutor alone would not be able to correct hundreds of translations in a few days. Thanks to this method, many students have worked constantly. From the students' answers in the final questionnaire and from the analysis of the Moodle reports it appears that the task submission tool and the quiz resolution were less used by the students (24 students submitted at least one task and 15 performed at least one test). However, for both activities it is essential to have feedback or evaluation from the tutor. During the interview the tutor explained that if he was connected to the platform when the students delivered a task, he immediately returned the correction and the students highly appreciated the immediate feedback. This is very effective because students feel supported and therefore they are motivated to keep studying. In the final questionnaire, we asked the students "Was it useful to have a tutor available to support you in the preparation of the exam?" and they answered "absolutely yes" (71%) and "more yes than no" (29%). To the question "Why?" the most significant answers were: "Because the tutor was very helpful and patient with all the students, following them step by step", "The tutor was available for different corrections and doubts that I previously had", "Because he gave me the necessary support that I didn't have in class" and "The tutor has always been available and competent".

### **Conclusions**

The results concerning the example of the French course show that the implementation of the online tutoring model developed has achieved considerable success among the students: 86% of them stated in the final questionnaire that they would like this online tutoring service to be activated for other teachings. The success of online tutoring is obviously also given by the competence and availability of the tutor, who is very satisfied with the experience. The results also show the advantage of an online tutoring compared to a tutoring in presence, i.e. the flexibility of the calendar (lessons at the weekend, at 9 pm, or during the summer) and a more informal learning environment for students who have more difficulty expressing their opinion in presence. The figure of the tutor can become a real reference point for university students who often need someone who can help them in the management of the study and in the clarification of doubts. Surely for the effectiveness of online tutoring it is important that the tutors are motivated, flexible and adequately prepared on the subject of teaching and on the modalities of the exam; moreover, they should structure the tutoring activity using the presented model and respecting the parameters described, but adapting everything to the needs of the course and of the students. In fact, in other courses the Project did not give equally positive results, perhaps because the tutors were not very motivated, or maybe they were not able to use the tools provided adapting them to the needs of the course, or because the service

was not properly advertised. For this reason, it is necessary to invest more in the training of tutors, in communication between tutors and teachers and in publicizing the service provided.

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