A Classification Schema of Online Tutor Competencies

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Abstract

There are many ways to classify the competencies of online tutors. This paper will investigate an innovative classification schema of online tutor competency based on an analysis of the current literature, with particular reference to the work of several selected authors. This schema has been developed to investigate the role these competencies play within the online learning environment. The study is focussing on the instructional and guidance roles of online tutors rather than the roles of course coordinators or developers of instructional material.

Competencies is a term used throughout the literature to describe many different descriptors of tutors and their actions. Berge (1995) calls them behavioural recommendations, while Cyrs (1997) calls them skills and strategies. Furst-Bowe (1996) use competencies to describe knowledge, skills, and abilities, which is opposed to Schoenfeld-Tacher & Persichette (2000) who separate skills from competencies that include knowledge, character traits, abilities and strategies.

Introduction

After examining many of the methods of classification and the individual competencies presented throughout the literature, the author had a list of over 500 individual competencies. This led to a decision to focus his effort on a limited number of sources (Berge, 1995; Cyrs, 1997; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples & Tickner, 2001; Salmon, 2000), as each additional source added both individual competencies and a new organizational schema for the competencies.

A number of categories may be identified which are a mix of what is constant in the literature and what is scattered throughout the literature. The author created a list of the competencies organized by creator and creator-labelled category. There were a large number of competencies and categories that were equivalent in various articles. Each individual competency was examined and sorted with other competencies which appeared to the author to fit together. After the competencies from the literature were combined and sorted, the author labelled the categorized groups of competencies based on categories used in the literature. This resulted in 5 categories, which are:

1. Technical Knowledge

The literature used general terms, like Berge’s (1995) use of “technical”, to Goodyear et al. (2001) use of “technologist”, to Salmon’s (2000) use of “technical skills”. Throughout the literature, the themes include attitude toward technology, choice of technology, resources, technological pedagogy, technical support and use of technology.

2. Content Expertise

As the literature was examined there were skills and traits which fitted together from different authors. This category encapsulates numerous themes from the literature. In this schema, these themes have been labelled content expertise, finding & providing resources, question analysis, relevant tasks and enriching interactions.

3. Process Facilitation

Process facilitation is by far the largest category in this organizational schema. The literature is filled with examples of aspects of process facilitation. This category is diffused throughout Berge (1995) having items in many of his categories. Goodyear et al. (2001) have designer and process facilitator roles with similarities to this category. Salmon (2000) has similar categories including understanding of online process, personal characteristics and online communication skills.

4. Evaluation

Authors have divided this category into very different schemas. Goodyear et al. (2001) divides
this category into its assessor, researcher and designer roles. Cyrs (1997) does not even have it as a separate category but includes bits of it throughout his schema. Berge (1995) includes this category in his pedagogical facilitation. In this case, the category of Evaluation includes themes such as: assessment, course evolution, feedback and monitoring. The category is about the evaluation of the entire offering, providing assessment for students as well as evaluating the course and planning changes, modifications or corrections to improve the entire online experience.

5. Course Management

Course Management is a category which accumulates competencies that deal with offering an online educational experience, but do not fit in any of the other categories I have examined. Administrator / Manager from Goodyear et al. (2001) and Berge’s (1995) Managerial Facilitation are quite close to Course Management. Being the institutional contact, performing administrative functions and keeping the course organization running smoothly are the type of themes covered by this category.

Conclusion

This classification schema has been created as part of a study exploring what competencies are needed to be an online tutor. The actual research question is “What are the relationships between the factors that affect the competencies required by online tutors in tertiary education and the competencies displayed?” This study will employ ethnographic approaches such as participant observation and interviewing to gather data in regard to the competencies required to be an online tutor.

References