



Infusing Soft-Skills in the DigCompEdu: "Digital Tutor" Definition, Role and Competencies

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Abstract

The recent Covid19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of speeding up and improving qualitatively the digital and technological development process in Europe in the educational field. Remote digital education showed various advantages and opportunities both for students and for teachers, but it also revealed the need for strengthening teachers/trainers' interpersonal competences and soft skills used in the digital teaching process. Indeed, in the context of distance/blended learning, there is a need for people who not only transmit information and knowledge to students, but also who are able to motivate, guide, and inspire them even through a computer screen. Therefore, an essential role is played by tutors in promoting motivation and inclusion among students, particularly those with special needs. Having this in mind, the article will present a unified definition and the role of "digital tutors", explaining their importance and the main skills and competences they should have. Firstly, the article will show the challenges and the opportunities that distance and blended learning is presenting in the educational field, dedicating particular attention to the theme of inclusion. Secondly, the results of the transnational study carried out by the partners of the Erasmus+ project "Digital Tutor" on the definition, the role and the skills of digital tutors will be described and integrated with the analysis of transnational, i.e. Lithuanian, Spanish Netherlands, analysis of VET institutes and experts' questionnaires, distributed during project activities. In conclusion, the article will reassert the importance and usefulness of professional figures like digital tutors in the evolving technological environment.

Keywords: Digital skills, Digital tutor, VET, inclusion, distance learning, blended learning, online learning, education.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a rapid acceleration in innovation and technological development [1]. Indeed, due to the restrictions imposed by national authorities all around the world, the need to digitize processes that were previously implemented face-to-face was more pressing than ever before. Like any rapidly evolving global phenomenon, digitization has brought with it many advantages [2], but also many challenges. In the article this duality will be analyzed with particular reference to the impact that distance, online and blended learning are having on learners' inclusion. In addition, a new possible professional figure, the Digital Tutor, will be defined and analyzed in light of the existing digital competences frameworks, like the DigiCompEdu [3].

2. Inclusion during online, distance and blended learning period

In the educational sector, many countries answered to the Covid-19 crisis by closing all the educational institutions. According to an OECD report made last year [4], during the Covid-19 pandemic and the related lockdown, countries used a variety of remote and online learning tools and resources to reach the highest number of learners. Indeed, the digitization in the educational sector has increased rapidly, reaching unprecedented levels, and this trend is expected to continue also after the end of the pandemic. In fact, global investment in education technology, that were of about \$18.66 billion in 2019, are expected to reach \$350 billion by 2025 [5].

This crisis has revealed many inequalities in our education systems, such as uneven access to digital tools or to broadband connection. Before Covid-19, among the 85% of citizens who used the internet, only 58% had basic digital skills, while just 33% possessed intermediate/ advanced digital skills [6]. Therefore, having access to a broadband internet connection is not indicative of one's ability to use it properly. Indeed, the pandemic has also shown many inadequacies, such as the low level of digital literacy of teachers and trainers and the lack of supporting tools for students with SEN (Special Educational Needs) [7,8]. It is imperative to overcome these issues and to develop a high-quality distance learning system, transmitting to teachers and trainers appropriate skills.



3. Digital tutors: role definition and competences

The new Digital Education Action Plan highlights how crucial it is to speed up the digitization process and to create a “free, high-quality and accessible digital education in Europe” [9]. However, as was mentioned in the previous paragraph, this goal is only reachable by transmitting appropriate skills to teachers. In this broad framework, the Erasmus+ project in the field of VET, “Digital Tutors: facing the new generation and challenges” (Digital Tutors) aims at improving the teaching/learning process of online and blended training courses by upskilling online teachers and trainers, in order to make them “digital tutors”.

3.1 Who is a “digital tutor” and which competence should they have?

Taking a step back, “Digital Tutors” partners try to clarify what is meant by the expression “digital tutor”. To support students in an online/blended learning process, teachers should be digitally competent, but this is not enough. An educator in blended/online courses should also be able to engage students, to support them, transmit passion and foster interest toward the subject.

Due to the rapid digitalization in the education sector, some competence frameworks were identified at EU level. Particularly relevant for the purpose of this article is the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigiCompEdu), which describes the skills and competences that an educator should possess to be considered “digitally competent”. One of the objectives of the project “Digital Tutors” is to identify strengths and weaknesses of this framework, in order to complement it with new soft-skills. Project partners [10] started their work by discussing a possible common definition of digital tutor and its competences. They agreed on a clear, short and understandable definition, reported below:

“A Digital Tutor is a teacher who teaches and tutors in an online environment with the goal to enable students to develop and learn online in an effective, engaging and inclusive way. The Digital Tutor has all the competences that a ‘live’ tutor or teacher has, plus the additional competences required to tutor online”.

The “competences” include the ones identified by the DigiCompEdu, as well as skills pointed out by partners, such as: creativity and the ability to create an active digital learning environment, which is able to promote inclusion and recognize students’ abilities.

4. Questionnaires to teachers in the Digital Tutor project

Among the activities foreseen for the realization of the first output of the “Digital Tutors” project (i.e. Digital tutor role and competence map), an online questionnaire and interviews has been delivered in Lithuania, Spain and Netherlands by partners to teachers/trainers, in order to collect information about their experience in distance teaching, the type of support they need, and their opinions on the partners’ definition of digital tutors. The total number of respondents were 125, mostly from VET centres and secondary schools. The main findings regard:

- Type of digital tools used, and skills needed in online teaching

In all the countries analyzed, respondents reported to use mostly a combination of different tools to get in touch with students and with other educators, such as: Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Gmail, WhatsApp. Particularly interesting are the results collected in Lithuania, where basic computer skills (91%) and creativity (88%) are considered the most important skills in online teaching. Moreover, educators declare to need a methodological and IT support, which may indicate both a lack of expertise in this fields as well as their desire to learn more IT functionalities and to gain access to new methodological material. Other challenges are connected with the low motivation of students, poor methodological support and the difficulty for students of remaining focused while listening.

- Experiences during distance learning

According to the Lithuanian questionnaires’ results, the majority of educators (89%) are combining synchronous (e.g. videos, PPT) and asynchronous (e.g. tests) teaching methods. Unfortunately, few respondents usually adopt methods that can foster students’ soft skills, such as debates, reflection or group works.

In all countries, respondents are adapting teaching methods, assignments and activities in order to allow students to learn at their own pace.

To monitor students’ behaviours, moods and comprehension during online lessons, educators usually ask them questions or monitor their facial expression, but just few of them conduct a reflection on that, although the reflective practise is also highlighted as essential by the DigiCompEdu. In the Netherlands, only a small percentage of respondents declare to be able to understand that a student needs help from the fact that their grades are not good (27%) and/or that the student does not attend classes regularly (18%). In this regard, it has been highlighted that teachers encounter difficulties in



detecting students in need and are willing to learn from other teachers how to overcome this issue and what type of digital tools can be used.

Spanish VET teachers emphasized the importance of the policies and resources of the teacher training centre, the professional training model needs a general upgrade in order to perform distance teaching. It was also stated that the motivation of teachers to learn how to teach online plays not a small role transitioning into digital education.

- Opinions about the Digital tutor definition provided by partners

Comments on the definition aforementioned were diversified in the 3 countries. Indeed, the definition has been considered “clear, correct and comprehensive” by 60% of Lithuanian respondents, while this percentage was lower both in the Netherlands (46%), where some respondents ask for a Dutch translation and some others did not have a clear understanding of that, and also in Spain (20%), where respondents suggest creating a more specific and concrete definition.

Summarizing the answers we can assume that around half of respondents think that the definition of the Digital Tutor role is clear, but the other half did not fully understand the definition, referring to the need of more specific description.

5. Conclusion

Covid-19 has had a breakthrough effect on the educational sector, changing the way in which the teaching and learning process takes place permanently. The Digital Tutor project and its questionnaire to teachers highlights the need for further improvement in the teaching methods and tools used during blended/online classes. In addition to stressing the importance of the policies of training centres and of the means made available by them, teachers in the 3 countries have highlighted the difficulties in finding out whether a student needs help and in overcoming issues related to students’ lack of attention or low motivation. They all expressed the will to learn from each other or from experts to improve the quality of online teaching, making it more receptive to the needs of students, more flexible and inclusive. They also need support in improving their digital tools’ knowledge. After being catapulted into the online world unexpectedly, teachers are starting to understand its potential and want to grow in this respect.

In conclusion, although some suggestions for improvement have been raised, the definition of the “Digital tutor” has been received quite positively by teachers, revealing which set of soft and hard skills a digital tutor should possess.

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