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Feedback Online: Experiences of Blended Tutoring at Roma Tre University

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Abstract: *This paper presents the experience of blended tutoring (online & presence) in different educational activities carried out in the Degree Course of Educational at the Department of Education, Roma Tre University, Italy. The observation concerns the teaching Courses of General Didactic (ay 2012 / 13- 2013/14) and of Educational Strategies and New Communication Processes (ay 2013/14).Furthermore, firstly, it is considered the experience of Degree Course of Educational FAD (Distance Education - in Italian: Formazione A Distanza) that marked the start of teaching as blended learning at the same Department; FAD began in the academic year 2004/05.The point of view that we claim, corroborated by the experiments carried out, is that the satisfactory feedback online is linked to the presence of blended tutor who exercises instructional tasks (versus constructivist) and plays a leading role (versus peer-tutoring).*

Keywords: *e-learning; feedback online; blended tutor; peer-tutoring.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Distance/ Blended Tutoring

The tutorial figures are crucial for the proper functioning of a training e-learning course because they play the delicate role of mediation between teachers and students and they make it possible the satisfactory feedback online, namely the management of information related to training activities. Many authors studied the figure of online tutor in the belief that the presence of adequate tutor makes the difference between an e-learning course and another, because tutor can solve the high drop-out rate that is major problem in the online training. Calvani and Rotta (2000b) point out that the online tutor is crucial to build an educational communication that involves students and teachers because e-learning uses channels and skills far more numerous than those of the presence training. In fact, the tutor who works in e. learning has to master more skills: digital, disciplinary, social-relational, motivational. Trentin (2002) believes that, if in online courses there is a high dropout rate, "the missing link" does not seem to be the technological aspect, but rather, the absence of a "human mediator that can provide what technology cannot: pertinence, immediacy, personalization, sensitivity, comprehension and flexibility". Rowntree (1995) underlines that the function performed by the tutor is linked to the adopted educational model: for example, it is most desirable that the tutor instructor has a significant presence in the management of his group, but if the teaching model is expected to collaborative participation, a tutor instructor will derail the goal with his excessive intrusiveness. Conversely, if the tutor does not intervene in a group in which is struggling to start an interactive dialogue, it may result an abandonment. Salmon (2004a; 2004b) offers an important model that marks the time and the manner by which the tutor acts. In Salmon's model the tutor is essentially a moderator, equated to the person that leads a conference (on-line) and that uses technology to achieve the good communication within the course. Sandelands (1999) analyzes the importance that the tutor should feel the climate in the group of the learners, and highlights the risks involved if tutor doesn't feel any perception. The author gives much importance to activities that allow tutor to control the situation. Sandelands (1999) believes that the control is related to the analysis of the materials produced by the students and to the quality and frequence of feedback.

Harasim (1994) provides operational guidelines for the exercise of tutoring; Draves (2000) believes that the tutor must fill out an agenda which make her/him able to drive, in a systematic way, the operations that take place with his group, to facilitate dealing with any problems and to maintain the pace of deadlines. Shepered (2000a, 2000b) states that the tutoring activity has to be designed for

specific training situations and considers, in particular, the types of interaction that the tutor promotes: the "synchronous", which takes place in real time (chat, video-conference), the "asynchronous" activated inconsecutive times (forums, messaging, email).Berge & Collings (1996) identify three distinct tutorial figures: the instructor, expert content; the facilitator, supporter in the learning process; the assessor, with the task of ongoing testing of the results. It seems very interesting to point out the latter function identified in the tutor: the formative assessment is an effective monitoring tool to grow student consciousness about her/his knowledge's and skills acquired during the course (Biasi& Domenici 2014; Biasi et al. 2013).From studies of different authors it shows that the tutor has a situational feature because it is closely linked to the type of training course that you want to design. In the schemes (synthetized) below La Rocca (2009) summarizes the patterns of communication, pedagogical and didactic which underlie the various types of online tutor, for the three different areas:

Instructional Field

COMMUNICATION PATTERN	**PEDAGOGICAL PATTERN**	**DIDACTIC PATTERN**	**TUTOR ROULE**
INFORMATIONAL	***RATIOLALIST-INFORMATIONAL***	***INSTRUCTOR-CENTRED***	***INSTRUCTOR***
• dialogue aimed at consensus on the contents of the message • information already built out of the dialogue	• know what • focused on the message • the issuer controls the correct reception of the message • it pays attention to the structuring of materials • it pays attention to the forms of feedback such as exercises and self-assessments	• focused on content • based on the delivery of content • directed to individual learning	• knowshow to developcontent • be able to analyze information and resources

Cognitive Field

COMMUNICATION PATTERN	**PEDAGOGICAL PATTERN**	**DIDACTIC PATTERN**	**TUTOR ROULE**
SEMIOTICS INFORMATIONAL	***SYSTEMIC INTERACTIONIST***	***LEARNER-CENTRED***	***FACILITATOR***
• carefuldialogue to another • human factors influence both the coding and decoding messages	• knowhow • focused on the cognitive modalities • it use analogical strategies for the representation of knowledge (concept maps, plans, scripts) • it use problem-solving, exercise, simulations	• focused on the student • directed to learning individual and in small groups • it includes peer interactions	• be able to develop,in students, interpretation and critical skills

Constructional Field

COMMUNICATION PATTERN	**PEDAGOGICAL PATTERN**	**DIDACTIC PATTERN**	**TUTOR ROULE**
SEMIOTICO-TEXTUAL	***SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST***	***LEARNING – TEAM – CENTRED***	***MODERATOR***
• it structures the dialogue of reflection, namely that meta-communication that enhances the linguistic context and paralinguistic (the background, the environment)	•knowinghow to be •focused on the knowledge linked to environment/context •focused on the self-determining of learning objectives and path •interpersonal negotiation as a primary function of collaborative	• focused on the group • based on collaborative activities • directed to collaborative learning • itincludespeerinteractions	•be able to develop, in students, attitudes oriented to face problems sharing experiences and opinions •be able to manage working groups

1.2. The Peer.Tutoring

The history of peer-tutoring (PT) is very old (Topping, 2005) and for a long time PT was considered a form less important than the classical teaching. Since about 25 years (Chi, Siler, et al., 2001; King, 1998) it has been understood that peer interaction is qualitatively different from and, like any other teaching technique, and it may present advantages and disadvantages.PT was founded as a part of collaborative learning, and consists of building a good intervention of tutorship among peers. Topping (Topping, 2005) points out that, not only in practice but also in literature, mentoring and tutoring are often confused; the mentor is the one who accompanies and supports students by exercising the role of guide; the tutor is specifically didactic, because she/he facilitates the relation between the student, the discipline, the teacher, the structure. As it is known CL is not simply to work or study together, but it is a teaching strategy built to pursue specific objectives; in cooperative tasks, resources, roles, systems evaluation must be defined by a teacher-conductor which facilitates and guides the path of the group. The goal is the matching of group achievements with the individual responsibility (Slavin, 1990).PT helps students to make themselves protagonists of their learning process encouraging the attendance of courses and the construction of a proper method of study. Specifically self-evaluation, meta-cognition and evaluation of the training process skills are developed. Experiments carried out on international level, show that if the CL and the PT are used together, they can produce benefits about social, relational, communication and motivational skills. Consequently they improve self-esteem and produce affection towards the study and the classmates (Cohen, et al., 1982; Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Rohrbeck, et al., 2003; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1981; Slavin, 1990; Topping, 2001a; Topping &Ehly, 1998). Generally, the researchers do not show significant results with regard to relapse of the PT and the CL on learning, but Topping (2005) believes that the studies on PT and CL represent an added value to the scientific debate.

2. BLENDED TUTOR EXPERIENCES AT ROMA TRE UNIVERSITY

This study presents three different experiences of blended tutoring (distance and presence) carried out within the Department of Education at the University of Roma Tre. Regarding each one, it will proceed by describing the context and by presenting the empirical observations. Of course the purpose of this paper is not to produce some generalizations, but to present facts that leading to the same conclusion: the frequency of cultural interactions and the learning outcomes are higher when the tutorial figures assume the instructional role and practice the leadership.

2.1. Degree Course in Sciences of Education FAD at Roma Tre University

In the year 2004, September, at Roma Tre University, the Degree Course in Education, mode FAD (FAD), started; the Course was established as a result of a Convention between the Regional School Office of Lazio and Roma Tre University, Department of Education. The Degree Course in Education is aimed at teachers of 1st and 2nd school level that abandoned their studies due to work and/or family commitments. More than a thousand people are registered to retrieve their university studies. The CdL FAD is delivered in blended mode, remotely through the e-learning platform, and in the presence in some locations of the Department. According to scientific studies, it was established two types of tutors: *organizational tutor* and *discipline expert tutor*. The organizational tutor plays a mediation between the secretariat and the students, the discipline expert tutor interacts with students on issues of specific courses that constitute the Format of the FAD (La Rocca 2009). When FAD started, in accordance with some of the theoretical models mentioned, to perform both functions, tutors were selected with specific competences on the communicative dimension. Over a period of one year, from the start of FAD, it was observed that the interaction between tutor and student was rather small in the forum, as shown in the scheme:

	COURSE	LABORATORY
NUMBER	12	3
AVERAGE MESSAGES IN THE FORUM	20	628

On one hand, Laboratories are similar to the Courses because they present contents of study, on the other hand they are different because they propose practical activities to be carried out, according to the directions given by the teacher. The result of the activities is then inserted in the appropriate forum, in which the teacher interacts with students of the Laboratory, providing feedback such as tips, insights, possible critical evaluations, and anything else that could emerge in a dialogue on theoretical

and practical content. From this analysis it was assumed that the such a large interaction in the Laboratories was mainly due to the availability of a expert on content who converses with students about course issues. So we realized that the number of interactions in the platform was linked to a mentor who had expertise on the content and not only communication skills. Only the course teacher can appoint the discipline expert tutor, who possess the disciplinary skills, and, at the same time, technological and communication skill. To validate the hypothesis that the presence of a *discipline expert tutor*, who converses about the courses issue and has a continuous feedback with the students, can positively influence the high number of accesses in the platform, it was decided to proceed with the placement of this tutorial figure in the Course of Modern History, when it was added to the platform. It can be said that the hypothesis expressed has been confirmed by experience, because the number of the accesses in the forum of the Course of Modern History was n.73, during the six months of the observation. In addition to this quantitative data, some tools (online check-list, online structured interview, telephone interview, observation grid on the issues addressed in the forum) were given to collect students' opinions on the lived experience. In particular, in Fig.1, it has showed the result of the check-list, which asked to indicate the functions of the tutor:

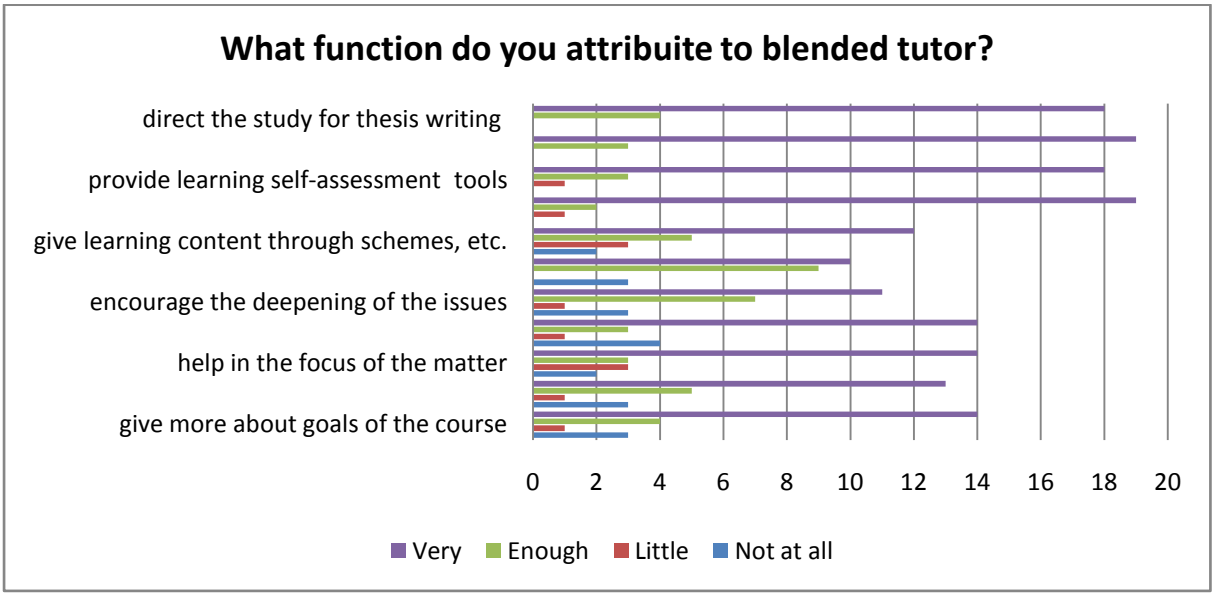

Fig1. *Graph of the outcomes of Chek-List administered to the students of Modern History*

By the reading of the data, it is interesting to note that most functions attributed to the tutor concern the feed-back on course content, the support to the student through the learning tools and the self-evaluation. Therefore students have seen the tutor in particular in her/his role as facilitator and instructor.

Furthermore, within the FAD, in the Course of Docimology, another investigation was carried out. In this Course were activated "multimedia modules" online in which a blended tutor instructor and facilitator was employed (La Rocca, et al., 2012). "Multimedia modules" online were constructed using studies of: modular didactic, concept mapping, meaningful learning, use of images and multi-media in teaching.

The "multimedia modules" satisfy conditions by which the students can:

- receive a more multi-sensory stimulation (audio, video, etc.)
- take advantage in the online navigation
- deepen study's materials through links to web pages
- apply knowledge acquired through exercises, laboratories, simulations, research, etc.
- use software to support their products (maps, data, graphs, etc.)
- verify the knowledge acquired (self-assessment, tests, etc...)
- be facilitated in one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many communication
- contribute with personal ideas or materials to enhancing the content offered in the teaching

- construct personal and / or collective multimedia content (text, video, audio, wiki, etc.) always open to continuous updating, maintaining traceability of individual intervention
- keep in touch with the study group also once completed the course (online community, etc...).

In order to motivate and to introduce students to the study of new training proposal, the teacher of Docimology introduces "multimedia modules" in a video in which he presents the goals of the study unit, the relationship with the earlier units (which continue to be provided in linear form) and new topics, providing information on new ways of learning. Motivation input, effectively stimulated by the intervention of the teacher, will be exercised in training by disciplinary expert tutor (Rotta & Ranieri, 2005; La Rocca, 2009) who supports the student during the course of study and testing in progress. The module is built on key concepts, each concept is explained in a series of slides, each series of slides relating to each concept is introduced by a reference to the previous concept, the concepts are organized and displayed through diagrams and / or concept-maps; the display of the concepts is accompanied by a vocal support, and by a movable arrow (cursor) that follows the words; glossaries and links to web pages are provided. The sensory stimulation also generates emotional participation, involving both the hearing and the visual channel, through the voice that introduces, explains and comments on the content, and through the colours, shapes, images, and the movement of some elements. The significant learning and the development of a meta-cognitive dimension are activated by concept maps, by anchoring to prior knowledge and to personal experiences, by the regular feedback to test learning (didactic activities), by the relational activities with tutor and classmates and by forms of self-assessment and collaborative assessment. Learning activities are proposed at the end of each group of slides related to a key concept and consist of exercises, laboratories, discussions, self-assessment and forms of interaction with the disciplinary expert tutor. The exercises, laboratories and self-assessments are performed by the individual student and delivered in a space visible only to the teacher and the tutor, as to ensure the student confidentiality and individualized feedback. The tutor opens some forum where students can investigate and debate about the exercises, laboratories and even self-assessments, so the acquired knowledge, the contexts in which it is applied, the developed reflections, the problems, the difficulties or the enthusiasm that emerged can be made visible and shared with the group. All those elements can create situations of shared knowledge that eventually can lead to production of wiki and to build of online practice communities.

The experiment concerned students enrolled in the academic year 2009-2010. The methodological procedures used are included in an experimental framework, with the identification of an Experimental Group (EG) and a Control Group (CG); the perspective assumed is both qualitative and quantitative; to collect data, it was make use of tools such as questionnaires, checklists, calculation of frequencies and statistical indicators, item analysis, textual analysis of the message forum contribution. The Experimental Group was composed by students studying Docimology using "multimedia modules", while the Control Group was composed by students who have studied Docimology using linear materials present on the online platform before the activation of the "multimedia modules". The purpose of the project was to determine whether participation in educational activities, supported by the presence of instructional blended tutor, involves statistically significant changes in outcomes, in the frequency and mode of interaction online, found in the Experimental Group in contrast to the Control Group.

It has been made a first monitoring of participation in educational activities and interactions by comparing the EG, which consists of students who used the "multimedia modules" with the CG, which consists of students who did not receive the same. Students' performances have been estimated by applying resampling techniques. In particular a bootstrap confidence interval has been calculated given that it combines point estimation and hypothesis testing into a single inferential statement of great intuitive appeal (DiCiccio and Efron, 1996). Here the implicit null hypothesis is that there is no difference between the two groups. For a fixed confidence interval length α=0, 05 the bootstrap interval evaluated for the SG is equal to [25, 80 – 30, 19], remarkably higher than the bootstrap interval calculated for the CG, [21, 75 – 25,81]. Given that the two intervals do not overlap we reject the null hypothesis, i.e. it is possible to say that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups or, in other words, students attend to "multimedia modules" are more performing than the other ones.

2.2. Cooperative Learning Online in University Course

This paragraph presents the procedures and results of on-line cooperative learning activities carried out by students in the academic year 2013/14 within two courses: "General Didactic"(GD) for the Degree in Education Sciences and "Educational Strategies and new communication processes" (ES) for the Second Level Degree in Professional Community Educator. (La Rocca, et al., 2014b; La Rocca 2015)

In analogy with the pilot study of academic year 2012/13 (La Rocca, et al 2014a), this second study consists of an empirical observation of the process and the product of the training in two perspectives: the monitoring of the climate in the group and the result obtained at the exam in General Didactic.

Both courses (GD and ES) are held in blended form (presence and distance learning) and the experience of cooperative learning concerns the on-line activities. In particular in this context it is deepened in the figure of the tutor that was different within the two courses. The choice of GD and ES was made out of common features between the two courses and of reasons related to their specificity. The common reasons can be summarized as follows:

- blended form structure: each course implies the execution of some on-line activities;
- consistency of the theme of the survey with the contents treated in the course.

The specific reasons are the following:

- GD is designed for first-year students who, being freshmen, often show a certain confusion in understanding the academic dynamics. This distress is increased by the large number of students attending to the course (over 200). It was decided, therefore, to promote a collaborative learning experience, to facilitate the insertion of the freshmen, as well as to encourage their motivation to study, reduce the anxiety associated with the examination, and promote positive interaction among students.
- ES belongs to a Second Level Degree and is therefore designed for students who will refine the professional techniques appropriate to the management of the workplace as Community Educators. By attending this course, students will learn the theoretical foundations that underlie the construction and the development of on-line professional communities and learn to design intentionally structured interventions with the help of ICT. So, they will learn both how to build educational on-line frameworks and how to build effective on-line communication situations for the professional team. Therefore, participation in on-line cooperative learning activities allows them to simulate future professional contexts.

In line with the specificity of the content treated in the two courses and with the learning outcomes expected, the on-line activities of cooperative learning have been made optional in GD and compulsory in ES. It was also decided to provide the activities of cooperative learning on-line to allow even non-attending students the opportunity to meet colleagues through the forums and to organize the common work with them.

The teacher of each course (GD & ES) introduces students to the activities to be carried out in the group work; he presents a summary of the theories and teaching strategies that deal of collaborative learning, with particular reference to *cooperative learning* and *peer tutoring* (La Rocca 2012) The seminar is held in the presence with the support of slides and multimedia materials; the same materials used during the lessons are insert in the online platform so that the students, attending or not, can obtain continuous access to information and can discuss with the teacher and with each other in the specific forum. The teacher, in his seminar, indicates the goals that each student will have to pursue in the group work, and distinguishes the goals for macro-categories: *cognitive and metacognitive*, *affective and relational*. The first (*cognitive and metacognitive*) aim to promote the use of descriptive language appropriately using the terms typical to the scientific areas, the identification of relevant information, the making of comparisons, the comparison of information and data by analogy and opposition, the awareness of function performed by the collaborative work in the construction of knowledge, the ability to synthesize materials in a final document, the reflection on the contribution of each subject to the realization of the final product. The *affective and relational* goals concern the acquisition of the capacity for dialogue and active listening, for communicating content and emotions with the aim to establish a mutual support in the learning process. Furthermore, in the introductory seminar, the teacher indicates the necessary steps for the formation of work-groups

and for the preparation of the on-line and presence activities. The on-line work-groups actually started about at the middle of the course, in order to enable students to acquire knowledge elements related to the course content and become familiar with each other on-line and in presence. Considering the context of university, the groups are formed independently by the students themselves on the basis of shared interests, but following the teacher advice, namely: do not exceed five units per group; propose a topic to work on to the teacher; decide which name attribute to their own group; identify a student who will act as coordinator and one who will edit the final work. Students communicate their choices to the teacher via the on-line platform - http://formonline.uniroma3.it/ - in the spaces reserved for Teachings of General Didactics and Educational Strategies. Here the teacher opens a forum for each group, where the students can communicate and exchange ideas and materials on-line. The management of the forum is organized differently in the two courses: in GD, the teacher and the experts with tutorial functions intervene only in response to explicit requests, with a marginal supporting, almost by presence / hidden or better "lurking ", ready to act if needed, but be careful not to weaken the dimension of peer tutoring, even promoting it and encouraging it, considering the students as pares inter pares. In ES it has instead opted for the establishment of an institutional expert tutor that performs continuous functions of moderation and support for individual groups both online and in presence. After establishing the groups, the selection of topics to be explored, the attribution of the forum and tutors, the date for the beginning of the work-group is communicated to the students; all work must be completed within the time schedule. Finally, the day in which each group must present, in a conference-style, the document produced consisting or in a hypertext, or in a PowerPoint, or in a wiki text or an interactive concept map, is fixed.

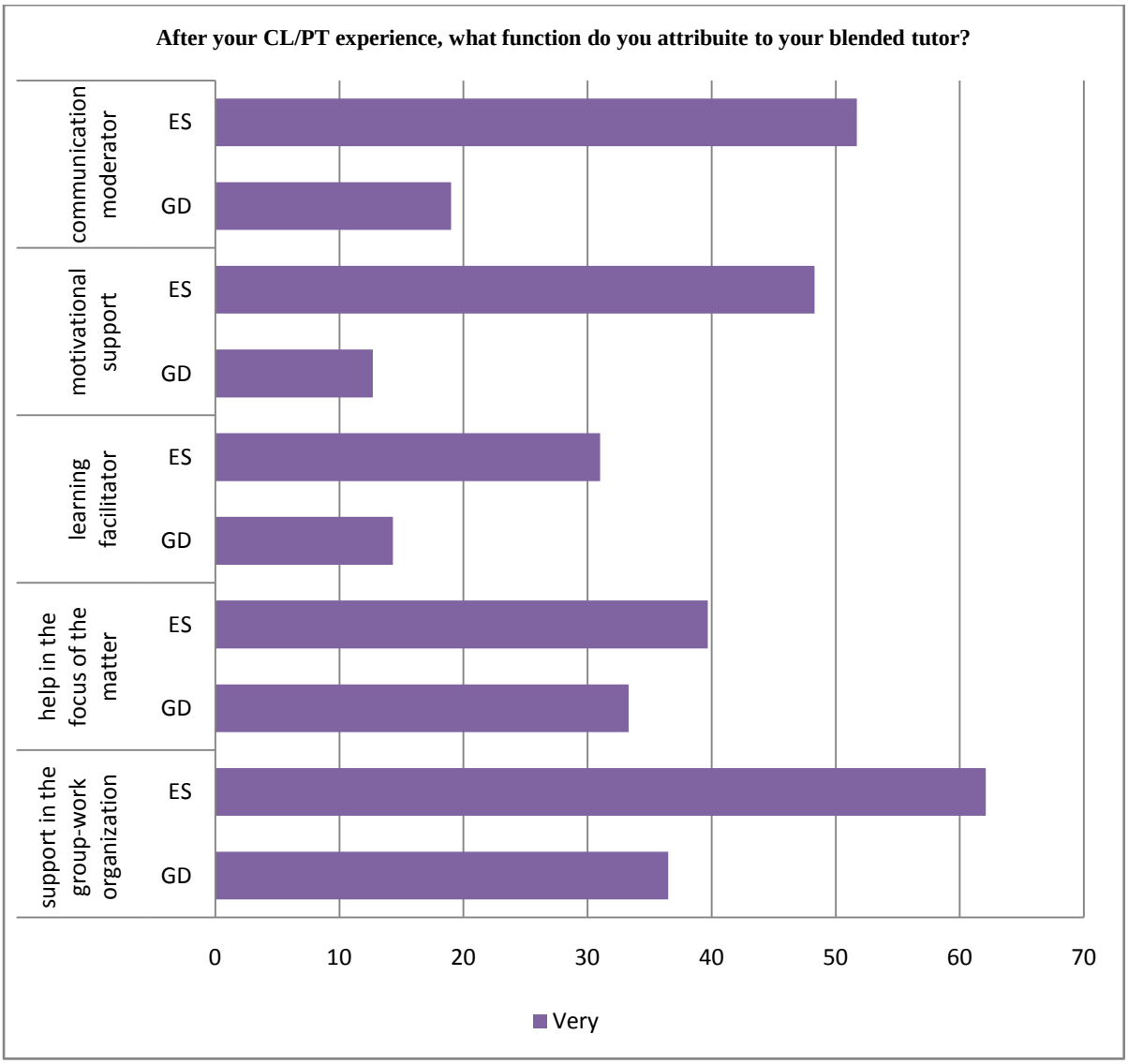

Fig2. *Graph of the answers to the barometer questions relating to blended tutor*

The monitoring was carried out by administering a short questionnaire working as a *barometer*, which gathered the opinions of students about the experience they lived in collaborative activities; the *barometer*(Cronbach'alpha 0.86) used has been built by the author of this work. Scientific literature indicates a *barometer* as a tool for the detection of self-perception of the climate in the group; it is generally used to give the teacher and the students themselves a feedback on relational and productive actions that took place in the group. The *barometer* used in the second trial (a.y. 2013/14), consists of 10 questions: the first three (A, B, C) and the last two (M, N) are structured questions, each of them providing predetermined responses articulated according to a Likert scale with four levels (Very, Enough, Little, Not at all); the others (D, E, F, G, H, I, L) are structured questions with multiple choice alternatives, derived from the free answers provided by students during the first trial.

The questions M and N regarde the function of blended tutor. In other publications the results of the monitoring carried out by the *barometer* have been described (La Rocca 2014a, b; 2015). This paper gives an account of the results related to questions about the tutorial figures; this issue has not been introduced in previous works.

As already said, the forms of tutoring established for the two courses are different: the peer tutoring in DG and the institutional tutor in ES. Pursuant to the expertise acquired during the FAD, in this experience discipline expert tutor were chosen, but in GD the tutor has acted in a peer-tutoring mode, while in ES tutor has taken a strong role with explicitly directive functions. The graph below provides the visualization of the student's answers to questions about tutor inserted in *barometer*. It is chosen to show only the option "very" because it express the firmly opinion of students. In fact by including others answers' alternative the viewing of the graph is not effective because the majority of the responses settles on the "enough". Students who participated in the activities and who compiled the barometer were 67 for GD and 38 for ES. The graph shows the average.

The graph shows that the answers "very" provided by students of GD are always very inferior to those of ES.In the general analysis of the data gathered trough the barometer (La Rocca 2015), results two interesting elements:

- The 67.2% of students in GD did not detect any critical element in the on-line cooperative learning experience. The remaining 36.8% indicated that the mainly critical issue concerned especially the choice of the components of the group (11.9%), because not everyone has done the same amount of work (19, 4%). They also suggested to enhance the role of the tutor and/or of the teacher, to help the group to manage the physical distance, and to provide a valuable support in overcoming any difficulties;
- The 68.4% of students in SE believes that there were no critical elements. In comparison with the answers in GD, the most important fact that emerges is that no one has suggested strengthening the role of the tutor or the teacher. Probably, this is because in this course the figure of an "institutional" tutor to whom students can refer had already been set up; the tutor allowed a better balance in the groups, so a decrease in the percentage of those who believe that not everyone has contributed in equal measure to the work has also been observed (8%).

This shows a certain problematic in the course of GD, especially about the difficulty of managing the relationship among the members of the group, both in the relational field and on the taking charge of individual responsibility in the working activity. As already told, the presence of an institutional tutor in the course of ES has helped students to create a situation of more relaxed and effective on-line cooperation.

3. FINDINGS

The experiences reported, carried out within the Degree Course SdE FAD and the Course of General Didactic (GD) and Educational Strategies and New Communicative Processes (ES) at Department of Education in Roma Tre University, have shown that in blended-Learning, when the tutor takes on a leading role and discipline expert, better results are obtained. The FAD's experience showed that tutors, who only possess skills on communication, fail to engage students in interactions on the forums. In online education, for the students is not enough to entertain a dialogical and motivational relationship with a tutor; they need to be led in the study in a systematic and structured way, by a tutor responsible for content and skilled in using appropriate teaching tools. The observations made in the Courses of GD and ES showed that the peer-tutoring run less in online cooperative learning than in

presence. The reason is in the fact that the managing of the relational dynamics in presence is more explicit and direct than to remote. The online work-group has better possibility to make goal if there is a clear and institutional leadership because each component of the group gets on her/himself the responsibility in completing the work of the group.

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