



# Pilot project for peer tutoring: a case study in a Portuguese university

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Tutoring or mentoring is a form of mutual and informal learning which has distant origins. This is a way of sharing knowledge and experience which has been proved to be extremely useful in educational settings, particularly where there is a peer that plays the role of tutor. Despite its informal characteristic, tutoring should be a structured process, with defined goals and clear roles for both: tutors and tutees, those who benefit from tutoring. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

**Design/methodology/approach** – As this paper aims to explore a pilot project, it was used as a reflexive and practical methodology, in a case study, analyzing the number of participants attending the project as well as the contents of the training course.

**Findings** – In this first project in a Portuguese university, 35 students attended as candidates to tutor, participating in the training course, showing interest in helping their colleagues.

**Originality/value** – This proposal for a tutoring program in a public higher institution aims to train college students to help other colleagues, giving academic support, helping in the adaptation to academic context, promoting autonomy in learning, sharing effective strategies and helping in maintenance of positive interpersonal relationships. These aspects are very important to promote academic success in higher education.

**Keywords** Higher education, Adaptation, Tutoring, Peer intervention

**Paper type** Research paper

## The universities of the twenty-first century

The role of universities is beyond the function of transmitting knowledge in a theoretical and practical unidirectional perspective. Considering the goals of the academic model that is seen in Europe, based on the Bologna Declaration (The European Higher Education Area, 1999), it is essential to rethink the models of teaching, the organization of curricula and the methodologies used in Portuguese universities (Simão *et al.*, 2002). Considering the changes in Europe's economic, political and social levels, higher institutions take on new configurations and present themselves as a crucial element not only in student learning throughout life, but also as a factor of social inclusion, empowering students and facilitating them to become critical and reflective citizens. Furthermore, it was requested to Portuguese universities, from the new and recent measures of the Ministry of Education and Science, to conduct studies that allows us to identify the causes of failure in higher education, so that suitable measures can be developed to promote success of college students (Albuquerque, 2008), which reveals a emergent concern about the quality of higher education.

Tinto (2000) says that most university students experience their learning process in an isolated way, i.e., social relationships are not a priority. Thus, learning process is basically based in a unidirectional way of information transmission, between teacher and learners. So it is crucial that these institutions consider the individual as an agent in constant social interaction, creating opportunities to develop new skills, such as the



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ability to adapt to new environments, different rhythms and types of work, continuous reflection skills, but also values and attitudes, and it is expected that these activities go beyond the classroom and beyond the boundaries of space and time (Miranda, 2007).

A major theme of guidance documents on educational policies of the European Union is the valorization of learning, which may be formal, non-formal or informal. The university is then a space which is considered as a center of creation, transmission and broadcasting of culture, science and technology (Pacheco, 2003). Currently, the need for support and guidance of students in universities has been recognized and, as a consequence, there has also been a search for viable ways to respond to this challenge.

### **The university ingress a challenge for students**

Arriving at university, young people are faced with requirements at various levels: new academic strategies are required; new approaches and different rhythms to learn; adaptation to new teaching methodologies and evaluation; more autonomy in the process of study and learning; development of new patterns of interpersonal relationships with family, peers, teachers and other authority figures; at personal level it is necessary to strengthen the identity, commitment with vocational pathways and to develop autonomy (Almeida *et al.*, 2000).

The entry into higher education, as a very important transition in student life, represents the possibility of continuing personal projects, although the implementation of such projects could require social and contextual gaps. The student usually arrives to this educational level with strong expectations about the nature and characteristics of this academic context. According to the literature (Albuquerque, 2008; Almeida *et al.*, 2003), it is during the first year of undergraduate courses when expectations about the university seems to break and the major adaptation difficulties appear, resulting on achievement breaks. According to Almeida *et al.* (2000), this transition requires overcoming academic, personal, social and vocational challenges. Regarding the social aspect, university students find themselves in the need to build interpersonal bonds with other colleagues. Feldman and Newcomb (1976) develop an extensive literature review and analyze more than 1,500 studies on the influence of higher education on student development, highlighting the role of socialization experiences between students and peers. Socialization appears as a fundamental aspect of student adaptation to higher education. Chickering and Reisser (1993) refer to relationships as “laboratories” for testing student communication and reflection with colleagues.

According to Almeida *et al.* (2003), if the student is faced with ruined expectations about university and his role as a student, not being able to understand and manage their life roles, or when those roles are perceived as incongruent, this can promote a feeling of danger to his identity. A study of Fernandes *et al.* (2005) with 48 newly arrived students to the University of Minho, revealed that most of the sample reveals dilemmas on entry to higher education as well as a great severity of symptoms, which may reflect maladjustment and psychological distress associated with the challenging period and its new demands.

### **Tutoring**

The practice of tutoring or mentoring is a useful way of supporting students in the challenges experienced throughout the academic development. Tutoring plays a key role in the construction of knowledge by many hands. The etymological origin of word “tutoring” is *tueri*, which is a Latin word that refers to the act of protection and supervision. Tutoring began to gain importance in the distant past, especially in Greek

and Roman civilizations. In Greece, sophists were the first to take advantage of clusters of people to share knowledge and skills, instructing those who heard them. They were often hired to be guardians of young people who wanted a career in politics, transmitting knowledge and useful techniques to this role. Names such as Socrates, Platão and Aristóteles, were recorded because they took the first steps in sharing and constructing knowledge by encouraging thought and reflection, drawing the first frameworks of what is known today as tutoring (Semião, 2009).

Before knowing tutoring as we know it today, we used to talk about it as “mutual education.” Gordon and Gordon (1990), referring to the “mutual learning,” pointed out that its essence is not new, as it has always been considered that there is a concomitant and complementary presence in the actions of teaching and learning: “He, who teaches, learns.” According to Western thought, it was up finding that children learn effectively more if it is another child who teaches her. Semião (2009) speaks of the merits of Bell and Lancaster which created an operationalization system, using older students, who used to repeat the material to the young ones.

In Portugal, mutual teaching comes at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a way to overcome low literacy level of army soldiers. However, this method was created to be used by children, to educate their colleagues, which means that, in Portugal, this method was pioneered in adult literacy, since they were soldiers who were teaching other soldiers. Later, this method was extended to teaching their families and the local community (Carvalho, 1996).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a progressive replacing of a direct action of the teacher for a usual peer mediation strategy, stimulating a climate of cooperation and mutual aid, facilitating integration and internalization of knowledge (Barnier, 2001).

After several periods of history revisited earlier, it has emerged new outlines and concepts related to the practice of sharing knowledge and learning strategies among students, what we call now tutoring. Coaching, mentoring, supervising and tutoring are several semantic terms that refer to many forms of practice encounters between people who want to achieve a common learning goal. According to Whisker *et al.* (2008), these terms have certain principles in common, particularly the development of empathy, active listening skills, time management and standards knowledge for psychological, social and educational support. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these factors have more specific goals, such as the promotion of student autonomy, independent problem solving, reflexive skills and other general and specific skills.

Carrasco and Pérez (2005) argue that tutoring is an action that aims to promote and facilitate the students’ development, into intellectual, emotional, personal and social dimensions; a personalized educational task, through an individualized monitoring, making it easier for students to build and mature their knowledge and attitudes, also helping the planning and development of their academic route; an action that allows students’ integration and adaptation, guiding and boosting their relations with the different services (administrative, educational, organizational, etc.), ensuring, therefore, the appropriate use of the different resources that the institution provides.

According to Schunk and Zimmerman (1998) sharing learning strategies is a key point to promote self-regulated learning in students. They also argue that learning study strategies promotes students’ self-efficacy, since they consider themselves able to implement a correct strategy in a task that they expect to be positive. Students who auto regulate their learning process seem to be those which show better academic performance, higher levels of self-efficacy and higher motivational rates (Wolters, 1998).

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Sometimes, university students refuse the help that teachers and other professionals were providing because it seems to them an extension of the work and the expectations of traditional classroom learning. Alternatively, peer intervention proves to be effective because the tutor is a figure next to the student and in an approximate age (Bruffee, 1984). Studies of Vygotsky (1981), about development and learning processes, have given an important contribution to the educational field. According to him, the initial learning process benefits from significant social experiences, with the mediation of other persons with whom the individual can interact, whether adults or peers. Based on these assumptions, collaborative learning theories emerge where we expect that particular forms of interaction between individuals occur, leading to the creation of learning mechanisms. In this sense, there are some assumptions that are considered fundamental, among them the idea that knowledge is socially constructed; language is the main “instrument” of thought and cognition; interaction can develop individual learning; conjoint research activities can make learning more active and autonomous, leading to critical thinking (Alves *et al.*, 2012). According to Fior *et al.* (2011), interactions between pairs confer a great importance in the formation of the student, for their interactive dynamics, meriting the attention of the training institutions. They also argue that new guidelines should be recommended, looking for activities that can minimize interaction barriers among students and colleagues, such as temporal barriers, that result from the excess of individual centered activities. Same for physical barriers, focussing on the physical spaces that confine the student to the classroom, limiting the interaction with peers. The same authors suggest the viability of new forms of learning that include the action with peers (such as in tutoring meetings).

### **Tutoring programs**

The implementation of tutoring programs in many Portuguese universities such as University of Minho, Aveiro, Lisbon and Évora have contributed for a better adaptation of their students to higher education. A tutoring program for college students intends the integration of the student in higher education and to promote their personal and interpersonal development through the promotion of their psychological well-being. In addition, tutoring is also intended to support students in their knowledge of the institution and its operation, facilitating the creation of a welcome network. That also intends to avoid the student's social isolation, and to support him to define his academic goals (Kram and Ragins, 2007; Simão *et al.*, 2008).

There are known and documented several forms of tutoring in the scientific literature. For example Mundina *et al.* (2007) reported various dimensions of tutoring, such as administrative or legal, teaching or curriculum, academic and training, and peer tutoring. Peer tutoring has a relevant role, since a close relationship between tutor and tutees is essential, according to the principles of Bandura about modeling (Simão *et al.*, 2008). In this support system tutors are students who already attend the institution, know the academic environment and can share their experiences with new students. This is important since the new students arrive at university assaulted by fears, doubts and concerns about this unknown environment and their new stage of their life (Mundina *et al.*, 2007). Many of the new students' questions can be answered with the experience of other students, since they are based mainly on issues such as: the method of teaching, autonomous learning, relationships with colleagues and teachers, different ways to search and access information, among other factors. However, the role of tutoring is not only restricted to academic issues, but involves

supporting and challenging students, taking into account their emotions and thoughts (Wallace and Gravells, 2005).

Although the adaptation issues arise more frequently in new students, it is also possible that they arise in any academic period related to the adjustment difficulties, problems of time management and social isolation. Because of that, tutees should not only be the first year students of university but also any student with academic difficulties.

The tutoring system was initially exclusive in primary and secondary English schools and has recently expanded into higher education. This happened because of their effectiveness in enabling students to understand the process of learning, providing revision strategies, study planning and learning autonomy (Semião, 2009). Authors such as Collier (1983) and Johnson and Johnson (1990) indicate that the interaction between students in higher education, whether formally structured or spontaneous, can enrich learning outcomes. Topping (1996) believes that peer tutoring is more easily understood by a sociocultural view of cognitive development. According to the vision of Vygotsky (1981) the role of interaction and social support with a more experienced pair is very important. This author considers that a learning process mediated by an experienced peer could benefit the learner more, since the support is given taking into account their needs and capabilities. Thus, peer support, when provided in the right amount, at a specified time and with clear objectives, works as a model and facilitates learning. Vygotsky also believes that support should be progressively reduced, so that the student becomes more autonomous and develop their own strategies and learning abilities.

In a tutoring program both tutees and tutors have benefits. Tutors have the opportunity to develop cognitive processes involving attention and motivation for the task, reviewing existing skills and knowledge. Consequently, the previous knowledge is transformed through the reorganization of information, allowing new connections and the integration of new information. Tutoring is a great cognitive challenge for the tutor, particularly in the simplification, clarification and exemplification of contents (Topping, 1996). In addition to the development of cognitive and academic skills, tutor and tutees develop, in their interaction, specific skills common in all contexts. These soft skills are essential to any area of life and work and involves: communication, problem solving, assertiveness, creativity, among others. It is important to stand out that the problem solving can be considered as an important psychological resource for the shift to higher education and its lack may constitute a risk factor for the psychological instability (Fernandes *et al.*, 2005).

Baudrit (1999) distinguishes the concept of tutor and monitor. While the monitor has to teach, the tutor's role is to help. The author argues that the role of tutor seems to have more benefits, referring to the "tutor-effect" ("Effet-tuteur"). The advantages of student tutors are: increased motivation, sense of responsibility and self-esteem; greater control of the task; improvement in psychosocial skills and development of maturity. According to Topping (1996) or Lopes and Silva (2010) peer tutoring can provide other educational, economic, psychosocial and political advantages. The pedagogical benefits involve greater information retention, increased knowledge and the ability to achieve their academic goals. The economic benefits include an increase in the time available by the teacher since any doubts could be solved with the tutor. The psychosocial benefits involve the promotion of interaction and interpersonal communication between students. Finally, the policies advantages cover student autonomy in relation to learning, reducing the disruptive behaviors. In an exploratory study (Almeida *et al.*, 2000) it was confirmed the existence of higher levels of

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adaptation and satisfaction of students who maintained some involvement in extracurricular academic activities. Internationally, 90 percent of students who participated in a tutoring program consider this as a key factor in academic success (Luna and Cullen, 1998). In addition, students with academic management functions reported having developed large benefits in their relationship with teachers.

In this sense, tutoring is presented as an effective way to make the university a more “humanized” context with support networks and closer ties between their elements, facilitating academic success and institution development.

A study by Simão *et al.* (2008), in order to analyze the variables that contribute to the success of a tutoring program, showed, through the opinions of students, that the main characteristics of a tutor are to facilitate and encourage and not to be a technical expert. By the view of other students basic tutor skills are: availability, stimulate motivation, monitor and contribute to the progress of the tutoring and support problem solving. In this mentioned study the tutors were teachers at the university. However, after examining the suggestions for future editions, it was found that students considered more helpful if tutors were not teachers, but colleagues, emphasizing the importance of establishing more informal contact between tutor and tutees. Among the various features that students considered relevant in the tutor, we highlight: a sense of commitment, sense of responsibility, enjoyment in helping others, listening to others, assertive communication, leadership skills, conflict management skills, team work and learning process support.

### **Case study**

As previously discussed, the shift of secondary to higher education may be a hindrance to adaptation, such as having to return to active study after a period of suspension, like students who are workers and over 23 years old. All students, at any stage of their academic career, may experience some difficulties, whether academic or integration and adaptation to the context or a new academic challenge. In the case of the higher education institution where the peer tutoring program will be applied, 42 percent of the approximately 500 students attending the first year have failed in one or more courses (Bento and Mendes, 2007).

A tutoring program in university can contribute to a positive transition and adaptation to higher education, bringing direct personal benefits to all participants. Similarly, there are indirect benefits for university services, since they can make improvements from students’ views, and they may work more quickly and efficiently, avoiding congestion of students with doubts about the functioning of the university services, since their colleagues would have helped them previously.

After analysis of all theoretical contributions discussed above, it was being implemented an experimental program for peer tutoring in a Portuguese university, intending the integration and effective adaptation of new students, the establishment of new social relations and the promotion of students’ academic success. A program of peer tutoring, to have greater efficacy in academia, should seek to form tutors, providing them with essential skills to relate to others and supporting them appropriately, either in academic or in socio-emotional terms. In this sense, an extremely important component of a peer tutoring program must be the training of tutors.

### **Steps for program development**

To implement the program, it was necessary to make an initial literature review to make it possible to draw a general picture about what is known about tutoring and its

benefits for tutees and tutors. Then we met with Coordinators of first cycle course of that public institution in order to make them know the general aims of the program and ask for their cooperation, indicating some students who could be potential tutors, gathering some of the main features mentioned above. We consider that tutor candidates should be students who were already in the second year or a subsequent year. A study from Adams *et al.* (2000) found that most students who engage in extracurricular activities is attending the second, third and fourth years of their course, since the first and fifth years may be the most critical for the student.

After these first steps, we contacted students, presenting the program and its overall goals, confirming their interest in participating in the program. These initial steps were started in May 2013 and the implementation of the program itself is scheduled for the beginning of the next school year (September 2013).

After the demonstration of students' interest in being candidates to tutor, the training course begins, with specific modules with topics such as integration into university, communication, emotional intelligence, motivation and anxiety. The next step concerns the interviews to potential tutors, which focus on issues related to tutoring itself but also with their personal characteristics. Candidates were elucidated about the importance of attending all of the training modules and the need of having a suitable profile for the occupations of tutor.

In the first three editions of the training course 35 students, of seven different first cycle courses, attended as candidates to tutor.

In the program we discussed important contents that are related to the challenges of university students and their learning process success. Also, our goal was to create dynamic and appealing sessions, helping them to clarify immediately doubts and simulate tutoring meetings, giving them adequate feedback. Through his way, we thought that students could progress faster as tutors.

The first module was about the integration process. In fact, is in the first semester that adaptation occurs, and there are several differences between the high school and university that need to be clear for students (Almeida *et al.*, 2003). Communication is also an important aspect to take into consideration, and these modules focussed strategies for listening and respond adequately, to be assertive and avoid conflicts about communication.

Emotional intelligence is another important aspect for the human relationships. Since tutors must be aware about the personal issues, feelings and preoccupations that tutees bring, is important to identify emotions in others and in themselves, knowing how to regulate emotional contents and also to develop the ability of feeling empathy (Goleman, 2010). Motivation and creativity are known as important keys for success, as we consider necessary to share some notions with tutors about how motivation occurs and some of the theories about vocational orientation. We also give opportunity for tutors to reflect and construct creative ideas, what made them realize how important is to maintain focussed and to have well established goals (Rosário *et al.*, 2006).

Anxiety is a frequent problem that students feel, particularly when they need to be involved in important situations, just like an exam or in an oral presentation. This module aimed to explain participants how anxiety occurs, what are the physical and psychological signals and how we can control her. The last module was about the auto-regulation of learning process, that is, how students can adapt their strategies to be more effective on studying tasks. We share some practical and helping tips, which tutors can transmit to tutees during the tutoring sessions (Seco *et al.*, 2012).

Each module has been carefully organized through logical and pedagogical goals as it is possible to analyze in Table I.

Stages	Goals
Meeting with course coordinators (e-mail and in person)	Clarification of the program goals and identifying possible candidates
Meeting with students (e-mail, telephone and in person)	Clarification of the program goals and functions of tutor. Recruitment of candidates
<i>Training course</i>	
Modules	Themes
Integration	Clarification about the functioning of the university and courses Change in management Differences between secondary education and higher education. Expectations of success Creation of a welcome flyer
Communication	Conflict management Teamwork Leadership Problem solving strategies Assertiveness
Emotional intelligence	What are emotions? Dealing with success and failure Identify and respond effectively to different emotional tones
Motivation and personal development	Guiding students in their academic tasks Engagement with learning process Monitoring academic progress Identification of academic and professional students' goals First job seekers, continuing studies or involvement in research projects
Learning self-regulation	Vocational problems Learning styles Methods of studying Memorization techniques Procrastination Reading techniques
Anxiety	Preparation for tests and oral presentations Stress management Planning the exam Time management Behaviors of students who may require professional psychological intervention Relaxation techniques
<i>Post-training steps</i>	
Program divulgation for tutees	
Follow up/initial tutors meeting/plan for tutees reception	
Tutees study visit, organized by tutors	
Weekly group meetings	
Monthly assessment (with tutors' records)	
Biannual review meeting (program coordinators, tutors and tutees)	

**Table I.**  
Planning and structuring  
the program

### Program assessment

The evaluation of tutoring program will be conducted in distinct moments and all over the process: before, after and during the training course; during the tutoring sessions and at the end of the school year. Therefore, the matters developed in training course



will be assessed by a structured form applied in the beginning and the end of sessions. In addition, the tutor's characteristics and their profile will be assessed in a semi-structured interview.

Tutoring sessions will have supervision by university's psychologists' team and monitored with tutors and tutees' monthly records. There will also be a biannual program evaluation, with all participants' records.

### Final considerations

Tutoring practices are not recent: it has a long story and an extensive investigation about its effects and benefits for the participants. Investigations about the developmental processes and the acquisition of knowledge, as a co-construction, strengthened the importance of framing joint learning and mutual support as a key factor in the student's adaptation and in promoting academic success.

A tutoring program should take into account the needs of the context and the participants, serving as a base for construction of successful academic and professional pathways, giving students key skills for the future, as this is one of the most important roles of a university.

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#### **Further reading**

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- Santos, L. and Almeida, L. (2001), Vivências acadêmicas e rendimento escolar: Estudo com alunos universitários do 1º ano. *Análise Psicológica*, Vol. 2 No. 19, pp. 205-217.

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