

The Performance of Tutors from a Public Institution and the Encouragement for the Use of Learning Strategies by Students

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Abstract This paper is based on the theoretical referential of the Cognitive Psychology/ Information Processing Theory, aiming to investigate how people learn, structure and use the acquired knowledge. This study aimed to analyze reports about pedagogical practices executed by tutors on Distance Learning, regarding the encouragement to use cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory learning strategies by the students. Fifty-six tutors from a Public Institution from the Center-West region of the country took place on it. Data collection was made by means of a questionnaire, using the tools of Google Drive made available to the tutors in the platform of the course. Answers were analyzed by means of the theoretical contribution of the Content Analysis. Generally, it was observed that the pedagogic practices of the participants were focused in promoting the use of learning strategies, being the cognitive ones the more encouraged ones with regards to the behavioral and self-regulatory ones. Behavioral and self-regulatory strategies of emotion control were the less incentivized ones. Thus, it is suggested that the training of tutors should be directed towards studies about learning strategies and that new studies are performed, especially regarding affective and emotional strategies regarding the emotion control of the student. Also, considering the lack of intervention studies, the execution of intervention proposals focused on using learning strategies, especially in Distance Learning, is suggested.

Keywords: cognitive psychology, information processing theory, learning strategies, distance education, tutor

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1. Introduction

Distance Learning (DL) is booming in Brazil. Data collected by the Census of Higher Education, released in 2014, show that, if in 2003 the offer of distance learning courses in Brazil was 52, in 2013 the same offer rose to 1,200 [12].

Besides that, results from the Census of Higher Education, disclosed in 2014, indicate that the demand for this modality is not only for higher education, but in all the different levels of education [2].

The search by DL and, in consequence, the fast growth of this modality is related with the increasingly demand of a "lifelong education" [4,5]. If some time ago the initial formation was enough for the demands of the job market, today it is quickly becoming insufficient. Thus, DL has been demanded, mainly due to the flexibility of time and space that it brings.

In face of the growth of DL and of changes generated in the contemporary society, it is no longer right to treat the distance modality "only as a mean to solve emergency problems or to fix some failures of the educational system at a given moment of history" [5]. In this sense is highlighting the need of investigating DL under all its aspects, specially, the teaching-learning process happening in this modality. This aspect started to be investigated only during the 1990's since, before that, the concerns were more about management and institutional subjects [5,27].

In this context, the appearance of new professionals is observed. They have different characteristics from the professor of the classroom mode, each one playing different functions and roles. Among those roles is the tutor, the main responsible by the orientation, motivation, instruction and follow-up of DL students. He needs to use distinct motivational strategies and didactic resources in order to keep the interest of the student by the material developed by the teacher and must be frequently touch with it [18,27].

The role of the tutor greatly overcomes the reductionist concept of strictly technical proposals. The tutor is a distance educator. The one coordinating the selection of content, discussing learning strategies, evoking the creation of academic paths, problematizing knowledge, establishing the dialogue with children, mediating learning problems, suggesting, instigating and welcoming. A teacher in the virtual space, exercising the function of training students [16]. Thus, it is possible to observe that the tutor, besides having the needed knowledge about the course content in order to help the students, asking questions and suggesting literature, must instigate and keep their motivation. Thus, this professional needs to have teaching procedures that motivate and encourage the students to take part in the activities of the course, exposing their opinions and questions and using resources available in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). In order to warrant that, it is necessary to ensure a motivational and safe climate among tutors and students, in order make themselves comfortable to interact.

However, even recognizing the importance of this professional in DL, unfortunately, what is verified on the real dimension is that this is a character very few investigated in scientific researches, besides being hired with few experience, ill-paid and overcharged with activities and students, because of several and imprecise tasks are attributed to it [18]. In this sense, highlights the need of clarifying the role to be played by the tutors and to define, on a precise and consistent way, the parameters that must guide their work, so that in this way, the tutor may perform the activities pertaining to it satisfactorily, aiming the learning of its students [11].

On the same way that distinct attitudes are expected from tutors conducting the teaching and learning process, different attitudes are also required from the students. It is expected that students enrolled in distance learning mode have autonomous attitudes in face of the act of learning, in other words, that they may act, think and control the learning independently. Under the pedagogical dimension, it is understood that autonomy means that “the human being is no longer an object [...], but a subject of its own education” and didactically, in short, that “students are autonomous when they assume and execute the functions of the teachers” and, for that, it would be necessary that the student is able to use the metacognition [23].

Cognitive psychology is significantly contributing in the educational context since its researches are concerned in investigating how people learn, structure and use the learned knowledge [29]. In face of the results found on researches, especially those regarding the Information Processing Theory, the importance of using learning strategies between students from different ages and school levels is highlighted.

When it is desired to train competent individuals, able to think about their own cognition and who are autonomous regarding what they learn, the teaching and incentive to use learning strategies becomes fundamental. In this sense, in face of the attitudes and characteristics that students of distance learning courses are expected to have, the use of learning strategies in order to potentiate those attitudes becomes essential [1].

Based on the theoretical framework of the Cognitive Psychology/Information Processing Theory, authors state

that “learning strategies work as reinforcements of the learning, since they are instrumental in leading the student to diversify the ways of studying, promoting self-evaluating attitudes and improvement of school development” (p.531) [21].

There are two important concepts about learning strategies, the first one where: “[...] the strategies implicate in sequences of activities, operations or plans aimed to the execution of learning goals [...]” and the second where “[...] has a conscious and intentional character that are involved in the decision making process by the student, adjusted to the goal intended to be reached” p.56 [31].

For Boruchovitch [8,9], learning strategies are a set of procedures used to facilitate learning, besides, it is also considered as a self-regulatory tool for students. By using them conscientiously and understanding the benefits carried by their use to the learning, the apprentice starts to exert more control over its learning, allowing the development of the capacity of learning how to learn.

The expression learning strategies has been classified differently by several authors, as follows. They may be divided into cognitive and metacognitive strategies [24]. Cognitive strategies lead the apprentice to a cognitive object and metacognitive strategies evaluate the efficiency of cognitive strategies by regulating when and where this or that strategy must be used. Basically, according to Boruchovitch [9] “cognitive strategies are directed sequences of actions representing more specifically what we do to learn and remember”. Metacognitive strategies, according to the author, are about procedures oriented for the planning and control of cognitive strategies and also about the metacognitive strategies, the monitoring and regulation of the thought.

Cognitive learning strategies may be subdivided into: rehearsal (repeat, copy and underline), elaboration (paraphrase, resume, take notes and create analogies) and organization (select ideas, use scripts and maps) [7]. Metacognitive strategies are classified as: planning strategies (establishment of goals), monitoring strategies (self-questioning regarding what is being learned) and regulation strategies (consciousness about what is being learned and behavior change when there is no learning) [8,21].

For Warr and Allan [32], cognitive strategies are composed by: repetition, organization and elaboration strategies. Behavioral strategies are composed by: search for interpersonal help, search for help about the material and its practical application and self-regulatory strategies composed by: emotion control, motivation control and understanding control.

Some strategies may be learned naturally, however others, more complex, require the mediation of the teacher, aiming to demonstrate the importance of those strategies incentivizing their use, according to the task that the apprentice will perform, until it is able to discern which strategy is more adequate for each type of task. Thus, the work of the teacher is not only to make knowledge available and to receive the products, but also, of fostering the processes by which those products will be reached, in other words, the learning strategies [25].

Some authors are investigating the benefits of using learning strategies by students of all school levels [7,8].

Based on those studies, it becomes evident the need for the teachers to teach and encourage the use of learning strategies by the students, independently of the school level in which they are inserted [11].

According to Pozo [26], teachers must borrow their conscience to students, since executing tasks, undoubtedly, demands a systematic process of “planning, self-regulating the practice and fixing its errors, evaluating results obtained, reflecting about ways of learning and what they are learning” and without knowledge about learning strategies, the students may have some difficulties. Teachers are essential for supporting students until they are able to autonomously perform the learning.

For Zerbini and Abbad [33] learning strategies are composed by three categories: cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory strategies. According to the authors, cognitive strategies are composed by Repetition strategies: retaking the information as it was presented; Organization strategies: identifying the main ideas, creating schemas to group and relate the knowledge learned and Elaboration strategies: reflecting about the material learned and relating this with previous knowledge. Behavioral strategies consist in: seeking interpersonal help: the subject asks for help rather than using only available information; seeking help on the written material not involving social contact and practical application: using what was learned. Finally, self-regulatory strategies involve strategies of: emotion control: controlling and identifying anxiety and prevention of distraction; motivation control: motivation and attention involved and monitoring of comprehension: evaluation of learning and change of behavior when necessary.

In this context, this study aimed to identify and analyze the pedagogical practices performed by tutors regarding the incentive to use cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory learning strategies by the students.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Fifty six tutors took part in the research. They worked in undergraduate courses of: Public Administration 20.33%; Physics 10.17%, Management 6.78%, City Management 5.10%; Public Management 5.10%, Health Management 3.38%, Economy 1.69%, Accounting 1.69%, Technology in Internet Systems 1.69%. Graduate courses in: Public Management 18.64%, City Management 10.17%, Health Management 6.78%. Graduate courses not specifying the area 5.10%, Public Management 1.69% and Education 1.69%. All of them offered as Distance Learning by a public institution located in the State of “Mato Grosso”. From the participants, 31 were females and 25 males and ages ranged between 25 and 34 years old.

2.2. Instruments

For data collection a questionnaire was applied to the tutors, composed by seven questions elaborated based on the Scale of Learning Strategies (SLA) developed and validated by Zerbini and Abbad [33]. In order to do that,

the instrument was composed by the following open questions, who aimed to elucidate the pedagogical actions of the tutors regarding the incentive for using learning strategies by students in different situations of the educational context: “1 – When students were anxious, apprehensive and questioning their capacity to execute some task or, even, to finish the course”; “2 – When students had little interest regarding some content”; “3 – When students could not identify the contents where they had more difficulty”; “4 – When students took no part in chats and discussion lists and did not exchange information among them”; “5 – When students demonstrated to have not understood the base text made available by the discipline/activity and/or demonstrated no interest in increasing their knowledge”; “6 – When students had difficulties to learn the content of the course”; and “7 – When students had no significant learning”.

Questions were elaborated considering that cognitive strategies are composed by: repetition, organization and elaboration strategies, behavioral strategies composed by: strategies of seeking interpersonal help; searching for help on the material and practical application, and the self-regulatory strategies composed by: emotion control, motivation control, and monitoring comprehension. Therefore, questions 3 and 5 were related with the incentive of cognitive strategies, questions 2 and 6 were regarding behavioral strategies and questions 1, 4 and 7 were regarding self-regulatory learning strategies.

2.3. Procedure

Initially the project was forwarded for the Ethics Committee involving Human Beings (“CEP”) from the Higher Education Institution researched, and approved according to Decision 071/2013.

Before applying the questionnaire, it was submitted to be evaluated by ten judges, being them: two high education teachers, three students of scientific research and five tutors acting during more than one year in distance learning. In face of the considerations and suggestions from the judges, the questionnaire was reformulated and made available by a link provided by Google Drive on the platform accessed by tutors of the investigated institution during 6 months in the period between April 4th, 2014 and October 7th, 2014.

After accessing the link of the research, the tutor was faced with the Term of Free and Informed Consent (“TFIC”). After reading and accepting the invitation to be part of the research, according with its conditions, another page was opened where the tutor answered the research. Thus, at each new answer, the report presented by Google Drive was updated and made available in Microsoft Office Excel, making easier to organize the answers.

3. Results and Discussion

From the answers of the tutors the categories as proposed by Bardin [3] were created, considering the incentive of the tutors to the use of cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory strategies by the students. The categorization system created by the authors was analyzed by two judges with previous experiences in content

analysis. Then, the frequency and percentage of answers according to each category were calculated.

Table 1, presented next, shows the absolute and relative (%) frequency according to the subcategories of answers regarding cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory strategies.

According to results presented in Table 1, the analysis of answers recorded by the tutors demonstrated that from the total of pedagogical actions executed by the tutors, 44.17% were about the encouragement for using cognitive learning strategies; 33.98% regarding the encouragement for using behavioral strategies and 21.84% were related with the encouragement for using self-regulatory strategies.

Regarding the encouragement for cognitive learning strategies, it was verified that 39.32% of the encouragement actions were aimed at the repetition strategy, where students were in some way encouraged to review, retake, read again content already presented in the course. According to Pozo [26], cognitive strategies of repetition demand a type of learning named association, with the purpose of simple repetition as can be observed on the results about incentives gave in the subcategory: review content (8.25%), read and reread the text (7.77%) and clarify doubts reviewing the presented material (3.4%). However, the author also states that association learning may happen by supporting repetition, which was the most encouraged by tutors as seen in subcategory: executing the proposals of the course (19.90%), which involves, for

Boruchovitch [7], actions such as: underlining, copying, highlighting information on the text.

In cognitive strategies of organization, 4.8% were aimed to the use of strategies such as: taking notes, planning activities and working information. For Pozo [26], cognitive strategies of organization would happen by restructuring, aiming to classify, creating categories with the information, which may be seen in subcategory planning activities (1.46%) incentivized by three tutors only.

Learning by restructuring may also have the goal of prioritizing [26]. This strategy may be visualized on subcategory: working information (1.94%). Boruchovitch [7] also highlights the elements involved in the cognitive strategy of organization as: selecting ideas, using scripts and conceptual maps that were not incentivized by the tutors.

Cognitive strategies of elaboration in which the students reflect about the learned material and relate it with the previous knowledge, were pointed by 1.46% of tutors on the following subcategories: taking note of the text and doubt. This strategy is also of the type learning by restructuring with simple elaboration, using techniques such as: key-words, images, rhymes and abbreviations, codes with external meaning; it could also happen by complex elaboration by the technique of creating analogies, building internal meanings linked to the studied material [26].

Table 1. Absolute (n) and relative (%) frequency regarding subcategories of answers from tutors about encouraging the use of cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory strategies

Cognitive Learning Strategies				
Categories	Subcategory	n	%	Subtotals
Repetition	Clarify doubts	7	3.40	39.31
	Review content	17	8.25	
	Executing the proposals of the course	41	19.90	
	Read and reread the text and use tools available in the Virtual Learning Environment	16	7.76	
Organization	Planning activities	3	1.46	3.40
	Working information	4	1.94	
Elaboration	Taking notes of the text and doubts	3	1.46	1.46
Subtotal		91	44.17	44.17
Behavioral Learning Strategies				
Categories	Subcategory	n	%	
Search for interpersonal help	Searching for help with other teachers	23	11.17	19.90
	Searching for help with other students	11	5.34	
	Searching for help between colleagues and other teachers	7	3.40	
Search for help on material	Executing researches	7	3.40	14.09
	Searching suggested links	3	1.46	
	Searching new suggested literature	14	6.80	
	Reading additional material	5	2.43	
Subtotal		70	33.99	33.99
Self-regulatory Learning Strategies				
Categories	Subcategory	n	%	
Motivation control	Staying in the course	28	13.58	19.41
	Verifying the importance of contents for its formation	12	5.83	
Monitoring comprehension	Reflecting about the learning	5	2.43	2.43
Subtotal		45	21.84	21.84
Total		206	100	100

The strategy of elaboration involves actions such as: paraphrase, resume, take note, and create analogies, precisely actions that students were encouraged to execute, in this study, by the tutors [7]. Those have been considered as one of the pillars for the education to be significant [22].

Results obtained by Góes [11] demonstrated that the tutors, in its study, did not encourage the use of elaboration learning strategies by their students, wherein they were creating the relationships between new and previous content. However, this practice is not valid to make significant learning effective, since the teacher does not know how the content was processed and filed in the cognitive structures of the students. Because of that, the need for the student to be encouraged in order to execute its own relationships is highlighted. In this study, even if incipiently, the encouragement for using the elaboration strategy was verified. However, it is necessary that this strategy becomes more encouraged, considering its importance.

Regarding the analysis of encouragement to use behavioral strategies, it was verified that 33.99% of tutors indicated actions of encouragement, the greater being the search for interpersonal help, with 19.90% of actions, in subcategories: seeking help with teachers/tutors (11.17%), searching for help with other students (5.34%) and searching for help between colleagues and teachers (3.40%). In the study performed by Góes [11] it was verified that tutors more frequently stimulated the participation and exchange of information between the students, differently from this study and also revealed the importance and obligatoriness of using the tools available on the VLE, corroborating with this study.

Regarding the encouragement for the behavioral strategy of searching for help on material, 14.09% of the answers indicate the encouragement from tutors on subcategories: searching new suggested literature (6.80%), executing researches (3.40%), reading additional material (2.43%) and searching suggested links (1.46%). However, regarding strategy practical application, which corresponds to the relationship between material and the reality of the students, so that they would use what was learned, there was no encouragement from the tutors, being the tutors themselves the ones establishing the relations for the students, trying somehow to relate the information to be learned with previous knowledge. Maybe this may indicate that the tutors are using a language closer to the students, as a facilitator of learning [19]. However, this behavior does not ensure that the students will autonomously perform the practical application, thus a higher investment is needed in order for this strategy to be encouraged by the tutor to be used by the student.

In the research performed by [11] it was verified that the tutors encouraged behavioral strategies such as the search for interpersonal help, clarified questions from the students and aimed to simplify the content. Just by encouraging the search for interpersonal help the tutors would be promoting autonomy, differently from what was visualized in the answers found on this study, where there were more actions encouraging the use of cognitive strategies.

Kirby [13] and Kurtz [15] state that cognitive strategies are micro strategies, in other words, more specific for each

task, related with the knowledge and with concrete abilities [31]. Tutors, by encouraging the use of cognitive and behavioral strategies, according to the vision of the authors, allowed the students to put them into practice, knowing how, when and why they should use them.

Regarding the encouragement in using self-regulatory strategies, a frequency of 21.84% was verified. Among them, category motivation control had a frequency of 19.42% subdivided into categories: staying in the course (13.59%) and verifying the importance of contents for its formation (5.83%). Regarding the self-regulatory strategies of monitoring comprehension, those had a frequency of 2.43% on subcategory reflecting about the learning. The encouragement for using the self-regulatory strategy of emotion control was not observed in this study.

In study performed with students from the course of teacher training regarding the use of the learning strategy of emotion control, the result demonstrated that the higher the age and the higher the education are, also the higher is the knowledge of learning strategies and emotion control. Another important finding from the study was that metacognitive learning strategies are positively, significantly and moderately correlated with variables of emotion control [6].

Emotion control and metacognition consist in factors internal/external to the subject which ensure the confrontation, redefinition, control, modification or modulation of the effective activity, in order to ensure the adaptive functioning of the person. The more it uses the learning strategies, the more it controls its emotion, being a circular relationship [14].

In face of the answers presented by the participants, it is possible to verify that despite stimulating the students to continue in the course, to perform the activities and to use cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory learning strategies, the tutors did not encourage them to use self-regulatory strategies of emotion control, which would be essential not only for a punctual situation, but also, in later situations where the students need to control their emotions. This result converges with results obtained in a previous study performed by [11] where the author also verified the lack of encouragement from the tutor regarding the use of emotion control strategies by the students.

Thus, if the participants establish, in their classes, the practice of encouraging the use of self-regulatory strategies of emotion control, in situations where the students were tired, dispirited and without much interest in the subject, they would persist in the study, by recognizing its importance, without the need of someone alerting them about it.

It is important to highlight the importance of those strategies, since they may be used by the students to evaluate their comprehension, allowing a change of direction when the student realizes that it is not learning in an effective way. Thus, those are strategies that should be taught and encouraged, independently of school level. Data obtained on the research by [11] demonstrate that there was no incentive for using self-regulatory strategies, contrary to the result found in this study that verified the lack of encouragement only regarding self-regulatory strategies of emotion control.

Self-regulatory strategies may be seen as macro strategies, in other words, more general and thus, less likely to be taught [13]. Therefore, the fact that tutors do

not encourage the students to identify, control anxiety and prevent themselves from distractions, controlling attention and motivation for the study, in order to monitor their comprehension (evaluating what was learned and modifying the behavior when necessary to reach the learning) makes that the students have little knowledge about mental processes, as well as about controlling and regulating them. A study performed by Turner and Hussman [30] revealed that the use of learning strategies of emotion control helps for self-regulating the emotions of the students preventing school failure.

In the information processing, learning strategies are considered as valuable resources that the student may use at the moment of studying, aiming to maximize the recovery and immediate use of information. In reports from tutors it was observed that they suggested to the students to watch the classes available and, in case of doubts, to keep in contact with the distance tutor, reviewing the content, creating study groups, performing searches when in doubt, systematizing studies, taking note of subjects that they considered as the most important ones, thus encouraging the student to work the information in order to deepen the knowledge and maximize the recovery [21].

According to Pozo [26], the strategic use is different from a mere execution, since its application is not automatic, but controlled, demanding from the student planning and control, understanding to manage the procedures. In this aspect, it was believed that teachers must also have this knowledge, in order to help the students.

The possibility of conscious access of the cognitive and behavioral abilities used in the information processing leads the student to reflect and, in consequence, to develop self-regulatory strategies, observing and changing the cognitive and behavioral strategies according to the task and need [17].

Therefore, both tutors as well as students need to know the strategies in order to use them when necessary. In order to encourage the use of the strategies there are stages for applying the strategy such as: aiming to reach the strategy goal, selecting a strategy to perform the action in order to reach the goal, applying the strategy observing the automated knowledge that it already has, evaluating the performance of the goals after applying the strategies [26].

Automated knowledge is understood as a component of the strategic knowledge, the study reveals that the teachers are not yet encouraging the students to fully exercise autonomy, maybe because they do not know those strategic components, thus, not having them automated. This makes more difficult to teach the use of cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory strategies to students, as perceived in this study.

The use of learning strategies are ways of understanding that they are ahead of the traditional ways of studying, joining the cognitive and metacognitive mental processes. In this process the student is seen as an active and responsible subject of its learning that must assume its role of an active learner [26].

It is necessary to encourage the use of technologies of emotion control since, when the student uses this strategy, it identifies and controls the anxiety and prevents the distraction in several situations, not only during learning, rising the hypothesis that, the more cognitive and

metacognitive strategies are used, the more control one has of its own emotions [6,31].

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the pedagogic practices of tutors regarding the encouragement of using learning strategies to students. In this sense it was found a greater amount of encouragement (44.17%) being executed regarding the cognitive strategies: repetition, organization and elaboration. Regarding the encouragement by tutors about behavioral strategies (33.98%): the search for interpersonal help and the search by help on material were encouraged and there was no encouragement for practical application yet. Self-regulatory strategies (21.84%) with strategies of motivation control and understanding control are also being encouraged. However the emotion control was not incentivized in this study.

Although the tutor acted, in order to encourage the use of cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory activities, the lack of encouragement to use the strategy of emotion control is perceived. National and international studies have been suggesting that the ability to control the emotions is important for the information processing and for the learning [6,7,9,30].

In this study the tutors are, somehow, encouraging more the use of strategies, but it is necessary that they encourage more the self-regulatory strategies. In order to do that they must learn about the strategies, application stages, so that they can encourage the students [26].

In face of the results found, we confirm its importance, since nowadays there is the need of students becoming active and responsible agents by the quality and depth of the learning executed by them. An effective learning would happen by properly using cognitive, behavioral and self-regulatory strategies, generating a meta-cognitive subject, where this one has the condition of managing its strategies according to the tasks, thus, learning to learn [31].

5. Suggestions for Further Research

New studies must be executed regarding the verification of emotion control by students, as well as by tutors, since there are few studies in the area [6] and in this mentioned study we perceived that the tutors themselves also asked for help to handle with the lack of emotion control by the students.

It is thus suggested the training of tutors regarding learning strategies and how to use them in their teaching practice, and also studies about affective and emotional strategies related with the emotion control of the student, corroborating with other studies indicating the need of more studies in the area [6]. Results also indicate the need of intervention proposals about the use of learning strategies, especially in Distance Learning.

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