The role of the teacher and the tutor in Knowledge Building discourse: a case study of an online university course

Vittore Perrucci, University of Valle D'Aosta, Italy - v.perrucci@univda.it
Ahmad Khanlari, IKIT, University of Toronto, Canada - a.khanlari@mail.utoronto.ca
Stefano Cacciamani, University of Valle D'Aosta, Italy - s.cacciamani@univda.it

(1) The issue/problem

According to Knowledge Building (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006), students should create a community knowledge and transform and produce knowledge through discursive practices. In such a community, students are encouraged to advance community knowledge through participation in progressive discourse (Bereiter, 1994) and contribute to the community knowledge and a shared knowledge objective (Bereiter, Scardamalia, Cassells, & Hewitt, 1997). While students in knowledge building settings are turned over agency to create knowledge, the discussion facilitator (i.e., the teacher and/or the tutor) may affect the way students engage in knowledge building discourse. However, within the context of the knowledge building, usually the role of the teacher (and the tutor) is overlooked, and the researchers mainly focus on students' discourse.

(2) Major goals: what you hope to achieve/accomplish

To address the mentioned above gap, in this study we aim to analyze how the teacher and a tutor play roles in an online course in terms messages written and Conversational Functions (CF). For this purpose, two aspects were specifically investigated: 1. The differences between written messages by the tutor and the teacher, and 2. the differences between the impacts of the teacher's and the tutor's messages on students discourse.

(3) How the research addresses the issue/problem

The analyses were carried out on messages written by the participants in an online course, Educational Psychology, as archived on Knowledge Forum® (KF). The course, organized in four modules, was offered by the University of Valle d'Aosta in 2006-2007. The participants included 25 (20 F and 5 M) undergraduate students, registered in Primary Education program and Educational Sciences program, in addition to the teacher and a tutor. To investigate the first aspect, the differences in participation of the teacher and the tutor were analyzed in terms of the differences in the number and types of the notes (i.e., notes or build-ons) written by them, and the differences in the use of conversational functions (CF), identified by CF4KB coding scheme (Author, 2018), using Chi-square and Exact Likelihood test. For the second aspect, the impact of the notes written by the teacher and the tutor was analyzed comparing the mean number of build-on received and analyzing the CF contained in the notes with the highest number of build-ons.

(4) Advances–what has been learned to-date

Results obtained show that the tutor wrote more messages than the teacher. The messages written by the tutor were all build-ons, while the messages written by the teacher included both build-ons and notes. In all the four modules, the initiating notes were written by the teacher. In regards to the CF, the teacher mainly provided comments and information from authoritative sources, while the tutor mainly provided applicative examples, metacognitive reflections, and encouraged metacommunications. The results of the analysis show that, compared to the tutor's notes, the teacher's notes had a higher impact: the teacher's notes received more build-ons than the tutor's notes. The notes with the higher impact, for both the teacher and tutor, mainly contained questions or problem of inquiry. From these results, it is evident that the teacher assumed the role of the KB activator and is focused on connecting the knowledge created with scientific theories. On the other hand, the tutor seems to assume the role of the KB facilitator, paying attention to the connection of knowledge created with experience.

(5) Next steps
For the next step, we will analyze if these roles played by the tutor and the teacher promoted the students' participation in Knowledge Building activities both at the quantitative and qualitative level.