



## The meaning of work for tutors in distance education

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The purpose of this study is to contribute new information to the ongoing debate over the nature of labor and its various forms. Studies examining the significance of work in various contexts, such as the various forms of employment contracts, have yielded varying results. But we still need to find out how DE tutors find fulfillment in their work.

**Method:** Thirty distance education instructors at a university were interviewed for this study, which used a qualitative research approach. Discussion analysis was applied to the transcribed interviews. E. M. Morin's categories were used to analyze the information gleaned from those interviews (2001). In addition, we noted the emergence of new categories from the interviewees' responses.

**Findings:** Work, as defined by the tutor in this study, falls into a number of the same broad categories identified by E. M. Morin (2001). It was found, for example, that many people who work as tutors in distance education do not initially set out to become tutors because they believe that tutors are looked down upon. Furthermore, the interviewees lacked a sense of community due to the institution's high unemployment rate.

**Implications/Novel Contribution:** Academic discussions and debates can benefit from studies that examine what it means to be a distance education tutor and from studies that explore whether the new categories identified in this research are present in other types of educational institutions.

*Keywords:* Meaning of work, Tutor, E-Learning, Higher Education, DE

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### INTRODUCTION

Workers' perceptions of their time spent at work are directly linked to the significance they assign to their work (Boas & Morin, 2016). Motivation, happiness, and output are all directly affected by the significance of this phenomenon. Educating in the present requires nurturing skills that enable the learner to construct his or her own knowledge through a cycle of observation, introspection, and critique. Now is a great time for educators to reflect on their teaching methods and how their students learn (Do Amaral & Vergara, 2011; Meidrina, Mawaddah, Siahaan, & Widyasari, 2017; Nedal & Alcoriza, 2018).

In this light, the proliferation of ICT, and the internet, in particular, has facilitated the spread of knowledge and expanded access to distance education opportunities (Noroozi & Haghi, 2012; Skoric & Kupresanin, 2018). DE has emerged as a teaching modality thanks to technological advancements that remove the need for students to be physically present in a classroom setting and give the student more flexibility in terms of when he or she chooses to engage in independent study (Attuluri, 2019; Kem, 2018; Zarb, 2016).

DE shows more improvement than f2f instruction in the Brazilian context (Fundacao Getulio Vargas, 2018). According to Scottini (2012), Distance Education has only been developed in Brazil over the past two decades, primarily in higher education and postgraduate courses at private schools, despite its long history on the global scene. Working conditions are uncertain because of the development of DE and the absence of regulation for online teaching work (Benini & Fernandes, 2012). How satisfied is the educator who instituted this new method of instruction with the results so far? Research for this investigation was guided by the question, "What is the meaning of work for teachers with a tutoring link in Distance Education?"

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To provide a definitive answer to this question, we conducted empirical research that will contribute to the development of the developing debate concerning the nature of work and the various employment relationships cited in (Irigaray, Oliveira, Barbosa, & Morin, 2019).

In addition to the introduction, the remaining sections of this paper are broken down into the following five subsections. Following is a summary of the literature that forms the foundation for this study. The final section details the methods used to gather and analyze the data. In the final section, we present and discuss our theoretical framework-informed research findings; Our findings are presented in the fifth and final sections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Meaning of Work

Work is an essential value for the individual and has been the object of study under various ontological and epistemological perspectives (Antunes, 2003; Concolato, Rodrigues, & Oltramari, 2017; E. M. Morin, 2001; E. Morin, Tonelli, & Pliopas, 2007; Team, 1987). In this way, the value that the individual attributes to it must be rewarded through recognition and analyzed as a symbolic rather than a material role (Souza, Spanhol, Limas, & Casso, 2004).

The study of the meanings attributed to the work can be done by functionalist ontological premises (E. M. Morin, 2001), critical (Antunes, 2003), and postmodern (Irigaray et al., 2019), being the construct studied in several areas of knowledge. The subject has a high multidisciplinary since a good part of the studies has been done by psychologists, sociologists, administrators and professionals of social communication (Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007).

This multidisciplinary can contribute to the improvement in the studies on the subject since the meaning of work is a multidimensional and dynamic psychological construct that results from the interaction between many personal and environmental variables (Bendassolli, 2007; Tolfo & Piccinini, 2007).

E. M. Morin (2001) states that work as a source of satisfactory human relations experiences must be based on social relations, between people, on teamwork, whether the intimate relationship in the work environment or external. Human relationships bring to the individual a social and personal identity that helps individuals to have more autonomy and security.

In order to properly discuss the meaning of work in people's lives, it is fundamental to analyze the meaning of life in modern society, which has changed due to new technologies and new workforce structures, implying changes in the values of concepts related to work (Team, 1987).

In the universe of long-term teachers in a private HEI, Irigaray et al. (2019) concluded that for them, the purpose of their work is to contribute to the formation of the individual, which influences society and organizations through their students.

Educators are undergoing a significant transition period that involves the modalities of face-to-face and distance learning. The DE presents itself as an alternative, especially for the student who does not have the time or is far, for geographical reasons, of the educational centers and, therefore, can not adapt to the modality of face-to-face teaching (De Mattos, De Souza, & De Souza, 2017). This topic is covered in the following.

### DE

Open, DE is a process by which teachers and students seek information, aiming at the construction of knowledge, based on their experiences and interests, in synchronous and asynchronous spaces and times, through a system of learning mediated by different means and forms of communication. Thus, DE, interactivity between the actors involved is indirect and mediated by a combination of new technological channels and communication languages (Vieira, 2003).

In Brazil, DE has grown rapidly, driven by government programs to facilitate the access of students to higher education. Every year, thousands of new higher education courses are recognized by the Ministry of Education (MEC). According to the MEC's Higher Education Census of 2016, the number of enrollments in undergraduate distance courses is close to 1.5 million, which corresponds to 18.6% of the 8.04 million university students in the country. Approximately 2.9 million students from corporate and non-corporate courses are added to this contingent, according to the census of the Brazilian Association of Distance Education (ABDE) (Associação Brasileira De Educação a Distancia, 2014). Ten years ago, Distance Education accounted for 4.2% of Brazilian undergraduates,

and face-to-face courses accounted for 95.8% of enrollments. In just one year, from 2015 to 2016, distance education had a 7.2% increase in enrollments, while face-to-face education dropped by 1.2%. The MEC estimates that in five years distance education should comprise half of the enrollments in Brazilian higher education (Marta, 2017).

### **The Tutors Work**

In the context of the distance tutoring modality, [Educacao \(2007\)](#) points out that among the responsibilities of the tutor are:

- (i) the responsibility to promote spaces of collective construction of knowledge.
- (ii) to select material of support and theoretical support.
- (iii) participate in the teaching-learning evaluation processes, together with the teachers.

Under these MECs guidelines, DE programs in Brazil have been developed around the figure of the tutor. It is an essential factor for the successful expansion of this modality in the country ([Machado & MACHADO, 2004](#); [Mill, Lima, Lima, & Tancredi, 2009](#); [Souza et al., 2004](#)) and it is more common to describe the role of the tutor in the distance modality than the definition of this subject.

In the DE modality, the tutor is seen as the student's supervisor, whose primary function is to accompany the academic life of the students, pointing out ways and finding solutions to the eventual problems that arise during the course. Still, the tutor is the element of transition and connection in the relationship between teacher and student ([Schlosser, 2010](#)).

According to [Barros \(2003\)](#), the tutors role "is to guide the student, to clarify doubts regarding the study of the discipline for which he is responsible". [Brod and Rodrigues \(2016\)](#) emphasize the importance of interaction between tutor and those individuals who participate in pedagogical mediation, where content is facilitated, problematized, (re) meaning, and (re) constructed. This dissemination of learning is also favored when this network of conversation, established between mediator and apprentices, is founded on affection, respect, ethics, a domain of mutual acceptance that legitimizes coexistence.

Although technology plays a key role in the tutors role, [Leal \(2005\)](#) warns that it is necessary to see the tutor from a broader perspective. Not only as a facilitator, but as an educator, or as a teacher in virtual space. The different points of view presented to demonstrate the complexity of defining roles and functions for the tutor in DE. On the other side of the question, the individual who carries on this profession also questions the meaning of his work. For this reason, the present research hopes to contribute to unraveling the meaning that these individuals attribute to the work of mentoring in the context of distance education.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative research is classified as exploratory in its objectives. The unit of analysis consisted of 30 long-distance tutors from an HEI based in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews and field notes based on non-participant observation of the environment. The sample was obtained according to the subjects disposition and the data collection, which occurred between May and June 2018, was carried out in Rio de Janeiro.

The interview script was drawn from the research of [E. M. Morin \(2001\)](#) and [E. Morin et al. \(2007\)](#) and consisted of twelve questions, which were divided into four topics. The first dealt with sociodemographic data such as age, education, marital status, and time working in the institution. The second dealt with data on work in general, its importance and its history/professional trajectory. Moreover, finally, the third topic dealt with the interviewees' impressions of what it is to be a tutor, how they initiated in this field, the affinity with the virtual environment and with the students, the positives and negatives of the profession and the relationship with the institution they work. Finally, the fourth topic dealt with the feeling about the work they practice, what is the meaning of it, how these meanings manifest in everyday life and what is meaningless work for them.

The central question for the objectives of this research was defined as a "What is the meaning of this work for you?", So that the interviewee could freely expose his ideas. From this response, it was possible to explore some developments, which led to the question, "What is meaningless work for you?" to pursue further understanding comparatively, bringing forth the antagonistic view.

Later, the interviews were transcribed and the data were submitted to discourse analysis, which according to [Saraiva and Irigaray \(2009\)](#), "intends not only to learn the message but also to explore its meaning and its meanings: what is spoken and how it is spoken, what is explicit and what is implied, the language used and the dimensions emphasized."

After the transcription and analysis of the 30 interviews, it was verified that the saturation of the field was reached. Then the data were organized, analyzed, and grouped according to the categories previously established in the [E. M. Morin \(2001\)](#) study. In order to visualize it, a spreadsheet was created containing, for each line, an interviewee and six columns containing the organization and definition of the a priori categories of [E. M. Morin \(2001\)](#) research: (i) The work that is carried out efficiently and leads to a result; (ii) work that is intrinsically satisfying; (iii) work is morally acceptable; (iv) the work that is the source of satisfactory human relations experiences; (v) the work that guarantees security and autonomy and (vi) the work that keeps them busy.

The manifestations fragments alike from the interviewees were grouped, and the main ideas for each category were drawn. When some fragment of discourse did not fit into any of those concepts, it was then grouped into another column provisionally called "other lines" and finally analyzed, thus allowing four emerging categories to emerge from these fragments.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No significant differences were found between males and females' responses. However, tutors who hold a doctorate perceived better recognition from the institution based on meritocracy. This fact is possibly justified by the institution's recognition of professionals who are investing in their careers and improving their curriculum as a result of their internal restructuring process. By associating the degree level with the factor age, the older tutors, those who do not have Doctor's degree feel forgotten and devalued by HEI. On the other hand, the younger tutors, who have a specialization degree, feel more valued to exercise their attributions, a characteristic that is also attributed to the shorter time in the labor market.

If we look at the "training in HEI" factor, the 11 interviewees who had their training inside the institution, regardless of the title, feel proud and carry this affective bond, regardless of the established employment conditions.

Even doe a small number of tutors had an employment relationship in the universe interviewed, it was possible to observe that, for those with a contract, the identification with the HEI is more noticeable. These employees end up taking on other activities besides being tutors, either as in-person teachers, teachers authors, or even coordinators, which ends up making the modality in question a secondary career. For the interviewees who do not have a bond, but are graduates of the HEI, the identification and pride of being part of their board of tutors are more perceived. Discontent regarding the remuneration of the activities performed by the tutor is unanimous, a fact that becomes a detail for those professionals who manage other sources of income through their career options. For these, tutoring is like a hobby, which raises their curricular qualification as they can put the name of the HEI in their professional experiences.

On the other hand, for those professionals who have the tutoring as their primary occupation, the criticisms are more compelling, since the volume of activities is increasing and the requirement from the students' increases, factors that are disproportionate to the values applied in their remunerations. In this case, we must also consider that tutoring in Brazil is still very poorly rewarded. One of the interviewees who is also involved in online course coordination activities testifies to the fact that the prices now practiced in the Institution are in line with those of the market, demonstrating that tutoring is still an activity that requires more significant investment and seriousness in Brazil.

Regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of the HEI tutors, 11 are female, while 19 are male. In terms of academic training, 09 have a doctorate, 16 have a master's degree, and 05 have a specialization. Regarding the format in which they carry out their activities, 28 of them accumulate their functions of in-person teachers with that of tutors. The average age of respondents is 48.7 years, where the youngest is 29 years old and the oldest is 66 years old. The interviewees are physically distributed among the states of Rio de Janeiro (12), Sao Paulo (10), Minas Gerais (2), Federal District (2), Rio Grande do Sul (2), Santa Catarina (1) and Pernambuco ( 1). The average time of classes taught to the institution was 9.06 years, where the one with the less time, has one year and the one with the longest time, has 15 years of classes. Of all the interviewees, 11 had part of their training inside the school,

and only 2 have an employment relationship with the Institution.

In addition to the question of the employment relationship, another negative factor for the relationship between the tutor and HEI was observed in the discourse of the interviewees who work outside the Rio-SP axis. For these, there is a sense of isolation, of forgetfulness on the part of the Institution, when there is not adequate communication, close when they do not feel included in the activities of the places where the Institution has its most important centers. There is a discontinuity in class availability, which creates a sense of insecurity for the tutors in these regions.

*Lack of recognition, as in every company there are groups because they are closer, those in other regions end up feeling a little out of what happens in the Rio and SP axis, it is not because the tutors are in different regions, that they can not be part of what is happening. (E11).*

For most interviewees, since tutoring is not the first career option, the need for such work to be associated with feelings of achievement is imperative. As one of the interviewees said, "Being a tutor at HEI is only for those who like it" (I4). Otherwise, it loses its meaning. Some of them even compared the tutoring to "a cachaca" (alcohol), "an addiction", but always in a positive and not pejorative way.

In this research, besides analyzing the transcriptions according to [E. M. Morin \(2001\)](#) a priori categories, four new categories were found, where it was possible to compare the feelings about the work of these groups of professionals within the same Institution.

In the first emergent category defined, "Tutor x Teacher", the opinions of the interviewees were divided into three, namely: "Tutor is assistant", "Tutor is a teacher," and "Tutor is more than a teacher". For interviewees who identify with HEI and feel valued by them, they understand that their role is no different from that of a teacher, and sometimes even greater, in contrast to teachers who do not have a sense of belonging. For these, the tutor is a mere instrument, without autonomy or validity before the modality of teaching and consequently, to the Institution of Education.

In the second emergent category identified, "The relationship of the tutor with the Institution of Teaching", the reports found in the tutors' discourses were inputs for the definition of the following profiles: "Those proud to be part of the whole", "Those recognized by meritocracy" and "The devaluation of the teacher's role". For the first subgroup, it was observed that the graduates of the Institution itself are proud to carry their flag, while those who feel recognized for merit work to improve their qualifications since they have the perception that this indicator is determinant for that the Institution offers other opportunities in the modality. In a more expressive volume, tutors emerged who do not feel recognized through their efforts when they are not able to work or when they are not offered disciplines to teach. Another factor that contributes to this feeling is the geographic distance that the tutors are in relation to the poles of greater performance of the Institution, producing the perception that these tutors are "forgotten" by the HEI.

In the third emerging category, "The mentoring as Opportunity or Need", it was possible to perceive subgroups of professionals with different strategic objectives. For some, "Tutoring is like a bridge", others see "the brand as a valuable argument", and in a very small proportion, there are those who "live from tutoring".

In the first subgroup, professionals were identified who try to tutor the opportunity, since it is not considered as the only form of career and remuneration. For them, tutoring was the "starting point" for teaching and in general, they are professionals who came from the market and invested their efforts in improving their training and thus, prepare themselves for teaching, "opening the lack of possibilities", by the speech of the interviewees themselves. There are also those who value the status that the opportunity to work for HEI provides. For them, visibility through the HEI provides professional prominence and makes keeping this career purely strategic. In this sense, it is relevant that the HEI promotes the reflection of the role of this tutor who uses this strategic scenario if it offers proper quality service and facing the seriousness that the position proposes. Finally, in a smaller way, but no less expressive, there have been reports of tutors who do not see mentoring as a supplement to income, but as a means of subsistence, an activity that, although poorly paid, is fundamental for them to remain.

Finally, in the fourth emergent category "The tutor-student relationship as a foundation of learning", when asked how they feel about interacting with the student through the virtual environment, tutors generally exercise

and value skills and abilities regarding their forms and response capacities, as well as emphasize the importance of the training offered for qualification in the modality. As a result of good interaction in this environment, most of the interviewees demonstrated that they feel rewarded through the student's feedback, accomplishing an effective knowledge construction.

Throughout the interviews, in the open questions phase, when asked about the good side of tutoring, the almost unanimous response was the flexibility that the modality offers, through an independent dynamics of time and space to be exercised. Tutoring provides practitioners with easy agility in scheduling, allowing specific commitments to be met, and "agenda breakthroughs" that face-to-face education cannot meet. One of the interviewees emphasized this perception:

*The good side is managing your own time, creating your own procedure. You can do this activity with programming for this. Professionally the fact of exercising time management, time-saving, I manage my time better; until the issue of mobility, in Rio de Janeiro I say up to security, are positive factors that I think are on both sides in the same way that reaches them, reaches us as a facilitator. (I17)*

*I find the DE very practical, the issue of not having to move, the asynchronous communication has the good side. I can do it at the moment that I can do, respecting the deadline, I have to be very frequent, anyway I do not have that matter of being stuck in a classroom for 3 hours. (I23)*

Another opinion widely perceived in the speeches is the constant exchange of knowledge that tutoring provides to the teacher. For them, this modality is rich in sharing knowledge with the classes due to the diversity of profiles and the most varied areas of performance of the students, who, in large part, are already more mature and with large professional baggage. Moreover, also, from the doubts that students bring, it is an opportunity for the tutor to preserve and improve his academic qualification, through research on the topics addressed and the doubts exposed by them. For tutors who also give face-to-face lessons, the benefit is mutual and used on both fronts. They transfer learning from online interactions to the face-to-face environment and vice versa, as suggested through the following account:

*... before I brought what I learned in the classroom to here, today I have taken a lot more from here to the classroom, because with this interaction, sharing, I was able to realize that it is so much knowledge that I have in DE with the students, for the diversity that exists of subjects and cultures that I can take a block of knowledge from here to the classroom in an updated way. The student gets in bring something new, is different from there, where the meets happen once a week, every 15 days ... this has much more face-to-face than the opposite. It is a constant exchange. (I3)*

Also, the tutor reports as a positive point for the performance of his work the opportunity to prepare better to clarify a student's doubt, a more difficult reality when attending class. In the tutorial, the teacher has time to think about what to talk about, research on a particular topic, and better serve the student, scheduling the activity more appropriately.

## **CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The tutors work has all the characteristics of work, as defined by [E. M. Morin \(2001\)](#), with specific characteristics more present than others. The activity of the tutor is not through the classroom, as in the case of a classroom teacher. For this reason, the challenge is when the tutor acts as a facilitator, an influencer, causing the student to cross the technological barrier and to be motivated to interact through it. This particular demands of this professional an intense dedication, associated with innovation and creativity, to the extent that the virtual environment is feedback.

The open questions allowed the consolidation of the four emerging categories: "Tutor versus Teacher", "The relationship of the tutor with the Teaching Institution," The tutoring as Opportunity or Necessity, "and" The Tutor-Student relationship as the foundation of learning ". The motivation for the entry of the interviewees in tutoring was predominantly due to the desire to be included in the teaching field as a way to increase their curriculum and the opportunity to obtain some remuneration. Although the income has been indicated as the incentive for this job, it is not attractive to the point of keeping them acting as tutors, since they understand that there is a great disproportion between the remuneration offered and the demands of the activity and its consequent time demand.

The results of this research demonstrate that, for tutors, the positive meaning in this work is perceived with higher intensity when there is an association with its strategic and personal objectives. For them, the distance model is not the first career option and the fact that the legislation does not equate the individual who holds the position of tutor in DE to a teacher, with his rights guaranteed by law, contributes to the perception of the lack of sense of belonging on the part of the interviewees.

As career flexibility allows those interested in joining it to have more than one option, mentoring is welcome for professionals with any degree of training. For those interviewed with professional maturity and doctoral specialization, this link, even if informal with the institution, is a differential in their curricular qualification, being the primary motivator of the choice of this career. For these, working for the Higher Education Institution in question is synonymous with status and differentiation in the market.

As a consequence, the negative side is the devaluation that this model of education still suffers, making the tutors do not feel recognized, despite all dedication necessary to the performance of the activities. The tutor is still poorly paid and inferior compared to the face-to-face teachers, and this fact makes the tutoring not seen as the only and not the first career option for them.

Although this sense of devaluation is present in this group of teachers, they understand that they are indeed teachers and attribute this affirmation to the degree of involvement and responsibility that the function imposes and that the student himself demands, a growing reality in this new way of teaching in question.

Questions such as remuneration, which permeated the answers of all the interviewees, and the need to elaborate new policies for evaluating the performance of these tutors, are topics that merit reflection by the Institution so that the quality of work is guaranteed and the workforce remains qualified. On the other hand, tutors can think of their strategic objectives to achieve satisfaction and return, not only financial or material, as many of them perform this function for the teaching experience.

Regarding the limitations, the findings of this study are not intended to generalize the tutors of all private educational institutions and not even those of the institution analyzed at another time. Each organization functions as a particular organism, with its characteristics and specificities and the time, is decisive to evaluate the meaning of the work, which changes according to the internal and external changes of the organization.

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