Perceptions of tutors and students on affectivity and conflict mediation in an elearning course for the Brazilian police

Percepciones de tutores y alumnos acerca de la afectividad en la mediación de conflictos en un curso a distancia de la policía brasileña

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Abstract

Conflicts are inherent to human relations and should not be ignored; however, they are a lesser component in e-learning discussion. The role of the tutor and the importance of affectivity in conflict mediation in a course offered to Military Police sergeants of a Brazilian state were studied. The perceptions of seven tutors and sixty-four students were collected in a questionnaire prepared with Google Forms. For those subjected to it, conflicts in the virtual learning environment were not common, probably due to the fact that the interactions between students and tutors were considered respectful and friendly. Nevertheless, they expressed their views on which actions were expected in the event of a conflict. In the event of a conflict between students, the tutor should act as a mediator, in an impartial, friendly and firm manner; in a studentandtutor event, one should seek conciliation and consensus through dialogue, although the placement of a temporary mediator was considered unnecessary. Both tutors and students felt that affectivity would help reduce or mediate conflicts. In the understanding of the students, keeping relations based on ethics and on mutual acceptance and respect would mitigate conflicts between colleagues. Friendliness was chosen as the most important social-affective competence a tutor should rely on in conflict mediation.

Keywords: e-learning; affectivity; conflict; tutor; student.

Resumen

Los conflictos son inherentes a las relaciones humanas y no deben ser ignorados, sin embargo, son escasamente abordados en educación a distancia. En este trabajo se investigó el papel del tutor y la importancia de la afectividad en la mediación de conflictos, en un curso de sargentos de una escuela virtual para la cualificación profesional de la policía militar de

un estado brasileño. Fueron recopiladas las percepciones de siete tutores y sesenta y cuatro alumnos a través de un cuestionario elaborado y disponible en Google Forms. Para los participantes, los conflictos en el entorno virtual de aprendizaje eran inusuales, probablemente en virtud de la interacción entre los estudiantes y profesores considerada habitualmente como respetuosa y cordial. Sin embargo, se opinó sobre las acciones esperadas en caso de conflicto. En los conflictos entre los estudiantes, el tutor debe actuar como mediador de forma imparcial, amable y firme; entre el alumno y el tutor, se debe buscar la conciliación y el consenso a través del diálogo, sin necesidad de contar con un mediador interino de buena reputación. Tanto tutores como alumnos creen que la afectividad ayuda a reducir o mediar en los conflictos. En las percepciones de los estudiantes, el mantenimiento de relaciones guiadas por la ética, la aceptación y el respeto mutuo son capaces de mitigar los conflictos entre colegas. La calidez se destacó como la competencia socio-afectiva más importante de un tutor en la mediación de conflictos.

Palabras clave: educación a distancia; afectividad; conflicto, tutor; alumno.

In order to understand the relevance of the e-learning tutor affectivity in the mediation of conflicts, one first needs to establish what conflict is and how to deal with it. Conflict, as originated by the difference of interests, desires, and aspirations would be the upholding of one position before another without considering the strict notion of correct and incorrect (Ceccon, Ceccon, & Ednir, 2009).

For Ceccon et al. (2009), the basic condition to mediate conflicts would be to acknowledge their existence; they are part of life and lead people to re-assess or re-affirm values and positions. According to the authors, well-drawn and well-managed conflicts become sources of learning, while badly-managed ones may produce undesirable consequences such as intolerance, rudeness, aggressiveness, violations of ethical rules, and psychological violence shown in writing.

The syllabus structure of the Brazilian course for instructors of the Community Police of the Brazilian Office for Public Safety (Department of Justice, 2012) includes a concept similar to that of Ceccon et al. (2009).

Social life is a process that is, in all segments, permeated with conflict. The difference, in the e-learning course modality, lies in the manner these are dealt with, through pedagogical mediation coupled with social-affective competences (Tenório, Souto, & Tenório, 2014a). Mediation is an important strategy for peaceful resolution of conflicts (Department of Justice, 2012) and can be defined as:

> A method through which two or more people involved in a real or potential conflict resort to a third party that will facilitate the dialogue between them towards a settlement. The mediator does not interfere in the final decision, being responsible for facilitating the communication between the parties, establishing a balancing point in the controversy, and allowing them to reach the fairest solution (Department of Justice, 2012, p. 25).

Despite the many Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) at hand, in modern e-learning, interaction takes place, most of the time in the written form. However, differences in thought also occur and not always the written word achieves the aims their authors desire and end up producing confrontation and, as a result, conflicts in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (Mülbert, Girondi, Pereira, & Nakayama, 2013; Costa, 2015). Other circumstances that are potential conflict generators would be: lack of affinity amongst students, lack of commitment with course activities, incompatibility in working methods, idiosyncrasies, and negative attitudes (Costa, 2015). Gender issues and differences in temperament were other elements mentioned by Azevedo, Santos, Pereira and Amaral (2014).

Beyond the circumstances, the tutor, a trained e-learning educator, generally acts as a mediator, a third party outsider, who nevertheless assists those to solve the conflict by themselves. Mediators do not impose solutions and does not take side with either party. However, they seek alternatives to create an atmosphere of respect and cooperation, in re-establishing the communication and a more functional relation. Should the conflict directly involve the tutor, their behaviour should be stoic and impersonal, with no exercise of one's authority from one's title. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify, in a conciliatory way, the reasons that led to the state of confrontation, but with firmness and conviction of the motives.

Ceccon et al. (2009), although alluding to the context of classroom education, warned that, in order to properly manage a conflict, a mediator would have to learn to listen, and dialogue, and build connections. In the context of e-learning, similar positions and actions are also needed (Hackmayer & Bohadana, 2014; Terçariol, Gitahy, & Ricieri, 2015). However, to know how to listen would be one of the main elements for effective mediation (García Aretio, 2002).

A way to prevent disagreement stemming from written communications is to adopt rules of good behaviour in exchanges via the Web, known as Netiquette. For Mill, Abreu-e-Lima, Lima and Tancredi (2008) and Azevedo et al. (2014), based on Netiquette rules, and through courtesy, it would be possible to foment a sense of community in VLEs. Thus, the tutors should use them in their practice and also stimulate the students to do so.

Different researchers have tackled the subject of affectivity (García Aretio, 2002, Almeida & Mahoney, 2007; Gaspar & Costa, 2011; Silva & Figueiredo, 2012; Souza, Petroni, & Andrada, 2013; Mendes, Santos, Tenório, & Tenório, 2015) although the literature is still incipient as regards affectivity in conflict mediation in VLEs (Azevedo et al., 2014; Mülbert, Girondi, Pereira, & Nakayama, 2013; Costa, 2015). Affective aspects in the teaching-learning process have been discussed by Almeida and Mahoney (2007). For them, affectivity would be, pursuant to the theory of development of Henri Wallon, the capacity of human beings to be affected by external and internal elements, connected to pleasant or unpleasant sensations. Wallon's development theory relies on the existence of three relevant and successive points for the evolution of affectivity: emotion, feeling and passion. Emotions would

have a predominance of physiological activation; feelings, from representation activation; and passion, from self-control. Souza et al. (2013), agree with Almeida and Mahoney (2007), when mentioning affects, seen as the set of emotions, feelings and passions that form the human psyche, would have a place at the basis of conflicts that permeate education.

The tutor has to set an example of behaviour to be followed in order to prevent and mitigate disagreement. Some affective actions during mediation with these goals in mind would be: to always have a friendly attitude, induce mutual respect, encourage the acceptance of differences, and stimulate the parties to go beyond places and perspectives (Tenório et al., 2014a; Tenório, Carvalho, Vital, & Tenório, 2014b).

Azevedo et al. (2014) reports on an experience of 119 tutors in e-learning and 36 in classroom education from a pedagogical team with the Federal University (of the city) of Lavras, state of Minas Gerais (Brazil), on the management of conflicts in e-learning courses and pointed the relevance of tutor qualification to deal with possible disagreements in VLEs. According to the authors, conflicts in the university course VLEs were frequent and, because of that, it would be necessary to continuously offer qualification courses on the subject, to stimulate reflection and understanding of how to deal with conflict scenarios and use them in favour of a better learning experience.

Tenório et al. (2014a), when examining the perceptions of twelve tutors of a private university in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), concluded that one way to avoid disagreements amongst e-learning students would be to have the tutor always behave in a friendly manner so as to set an example. For Mendes et al. (2015), one way to reduce the aggressiveness of course attendants in VLEs, according to the perceptions of six tutors in a private Rio de Janeiro institution, would be to have the tutor suggesting an attitude based on ethics and acceptance.

Campos, Melo and Rodrigues (2014) studied the role of affectivity in e-learning based on the perceptions of four tutors and sixteen attendants of a postgraduate e-learning course of a professional education institution in Rio Grande do Norte, NE Brazil. For the subjects studied, affectivity would be essential for e-learning, including conflict mediation. According to the tutor, through affectivity one would be able to sensitise the student and induce him/her to participate in a friendly way of the collective learning process. However, according to the students, the tutor should take the lead in establishing affective relations in the VLE, although these would only come to be if the students were committed with the course.

Costa (2015) investigated factors linked to the social dimension in the interaction between students in collaborative work done in VLEs. The subjects in his study were 154 degree and postgraduate courses in Argentinian universities. For the author there would be several aspects, including social-affective ones, capable of causing acceptance or rejection amongst the students. In this sense, a strategy favourable to collective learning would be the mediation of conflicts as soon as they arose.

However, according to the perceptions of ten e-learning course attendants of a private university in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) reported by Tenório et al. (2014b), the cordiality encouraged by the tutor, towards avoiding possible disagreements amongst colleagues, would not be essential for interaction. The acts of the e-learning course tutor in a mediation of conflicts at the VLE and the importance of affectivity in maintaining a harmonious, cooperative and facilitating atmosphere should have the marks of fast, friendly and assertive intervention.

In this case study an investigation was made of the role of the tutor and the importance of affectivity in a course offered to Brazilian Military Police sergeants of a Brazilian state. The goal was to understand how the mediation of conflicts is done, based on the perceptions of course tutors and students. The main issues to guide the research were:

- What forms of conflict mediation are applied by tutors in their professional practice?
- What is the importance of affectivity in the VLE of a course with a military focus?
- Is affectivity a part of the tutorial practice in conflict mediation?

METHODOLOGY

The influence of affectivity in the mediation of e-learning conflicts was studied. The study had a qualitative character. Priority was given to investigate affectivity based on the perceptions of tutors and students of a sergeant refresher course as e-learning for military police officers of a Brazilian state.

Context of the study

The nine-week-long course was offered as an e-learning course since 2012, aimed at qualifying staff to career progression, from 2nd sergeant to 1st sergeant and sub-lieutenant. It was fully developed and maintained by an in-house team. The institution also had its own software solution to implement the VLE.

The initial expectation was to have the participation of fifteen tutors and one hundred students within the course. The impressions of the tutors were discovered via an online questionnaire. The first goal was to apply it personally, but the educators lived in different states, something that made the scheduling of field visits impossible to attain. All the course tutors were asked to answer the questionnaire, but only 7 of them did so. The students answered another online questionnaire. Only those with email addresses included in a list provided by the Military Education Unit Command were asked to participate. A random selection was made of 1,200 course attendants from a total 2,021. There were 64 full answers to the questionnaire.

Subjects in the survey

The tutors had hierarchical positions above those of the attendants. Of the seven respondents, four were men and three were women, aged 31-45. All had university education, mostly in the Human and Social Sciences area (6). Three (A, E, and F) had experience in elearning tutoring outside the military domain. The other three (C, D, and G) had been in tutoring for less than a year. Four (A, B, E, and F) said they had taken courses to work with elearning.

Subject A tutored two disciplines, and the others only one. Most of the respondents (5) said they usually had more than 45 students per tutor. Almost all (6) accessed the VLE on a daily basis. They generally dedicated from 5 to 10 hours a week to the course. The tools most widely used were messaging (6) and forum (5). Most of them (5) considered the relationship with the students as good. On the other hand, tutors C and G regarded it as regular or terrible, respectively.

Sixty-four students, all of them male, answered the online questionnaire. Most of them (33) were aged 41-45. The respondents usually had only secondary school education (41). Almost all (63) thought the fact the course was taken on an e-learning mode made it all the easier to take. The students generally considered the course as excellent (26) or good (31).

Course monitoring was done with relative frequency as almost all (61) accessed the VLE at least once a week. The forum (30), email (30), messaging (26) and questionnaire (25) were the main tools used by students in spite of the fact that not all tutors used them. Most of the respondents considered the relationship with the tutor and the colleagues in the VLE as excellent or good.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected on the third quarter of 2015. Tutors and students were advised on the survey via email and their acceptance to answer was signalled with the answers to the online questionnaires, which were produced with the Goggle Forms tool. Based on the answers to the questionnaires, it was possible to identify the profiles of the subjects in the survey and their thoughts on affectivity in the course.

The questionnaires had questions with semi-closed or closed answers to facilitate the respondent in manifesting his/her opinions. The questions with semi-closed answers allowed for free expression, and reinforced the idea of respondent contributions and the interest of the researcher in his/her perceptions.

The data were subjected to a descriptive and qualitative analysis (Gil, 2010; Yin, 2010). The data from the closed questions were accounted for and tables were produced with the sums for answer frequencies. After that, interpretative analysis of data and its comparison with already-published studies was done. The raw data from questions with semi-closed replies was systematised through key-words and with word categorisation, which allowed giving meaning to the set of replies. The

results were compared to those in the works of other authors – identified in the introduction.

Replies related to similar questions in the two questionnaires were compared according to the perception of the groups of students and tutors. The compilation of data collected with the questionnaires was done with the anonymity of the participants. When needed, participants were identified by letters (tutor A, tutor B, etc.) or numerals (student 1, student 2, etc.).

Reliability of the methodology for data collection and analysis

Confidence on the data collecting instruments and methodology was gained through a series of triangulation procedures (Flick, 2004). Decision was to perform a purely qualitative study of the retrieved data. No attempt was made to build metric scales to measure previously identified or pre-established traits of the subjects. All data were of nominal or, at most, of ordinal value.

According to Flick (2004) and Mathison (1988), three main types of triangulation strategies are most useful in qualitative evaluations of social phenomena – of methodology, data and investigators. Methodological triangulation consists in the application of multiple methods of data acquisition and analysis. Data triangulation is basically the use of several data sources. Investigator triangulation refers to involving, in parallel and as independently as possible, more than one researcher at some stage of the study.

The value of triangulations is not just avoiding biases. Their great benefit is providing means to identify convergences, inconsistencies and contradictions (Mathison, 1988). In analyzing social data, all three outcomes from triangulation strategies furnish valuable abridged information to construct telling propositions. The three kinds – convergent, inconsistent or contradictory – supply evidences, which are required to make sense of the richness and diversity in a social phenomenon.

In the present study, three data generating methods were employed in methodological triangulation: an early semi-structured interview with the head officer of the course, the questionnaire to the tutors and the questionnaire to the students. The aim of the interview was acquiring general and broad knowledge about the course and the student's profile. It was composed of twenty-nine questions about various aspects of the course, including objectives, public, structure, educational resources and personnel. The answers helped to shape the questionnaires respectively applied to tutors and students. Since the interview answers were of a different nature, neither based on perceptions nor about mediation or conflict, they were not directly accounted in the ensuing discussion of the main data from the questionnaires. Nevertheless, the information from the three data sources was continuously cross-checked throughout the subsequent qualitative analyses of the responses to the questionnaires.

Consequent to the questionnaire applications, several data triangulations were undertaken to prove their reliability. At the outset, all of the 2,021 course students were randomly sorted in a list. Then, the first 200 were picked and individually invited, among them 11 adhered and answered to the student questionnaire. At the same time, all the 15 tutors were also invited, among them 7 responded to the respective questionnaire. Since the questionnaires to both groups were similar in many aspects, the responses from that first batch of students were qualitatively checked against the ones obtained from the tutors. No significant contradiction or nonconformity, which might have pointed out a flaw in the similar questions, was observed.

Thereon, to complete the probing of the student's set, the next 1,000 names from the randomly sorted list were individually invited. As the result, a second batch of 53 complete answers to the questionnaire was amassed. Subsequently, a quantitative statistical test was carried out to evaluate the adherence rate *homogeneity* between the two samplings of the student's set – i.e., to test for statistical evidence that the partaking probability of a member from the first 200 subset would not be equal to the partaking probability of one from the second 1,000 subset. To this end, a 2x2 contingency table was draw, in which the two samplings were arranged in the rows and the adherence or noncompliance of the invited students were set in the columns. Thereof, the assumption of an underlying chi-square probability distribution of $k = 1$ degree of freedom was made for the test statistic given by $T = N(f_{11}f_{22} - f_{12}f_{21})^2/R_1R_2C_1C_2$ (Conover, 1980), in which $N = 1200$, $R_1 = 200$, $R_2 = 1000$, $C_1 = 64$, $C_2 = 1136$, $f_{11} = 11$, $f_{22} = 947$, $f_{12} = 53$ and $f_{21} = 189$. The resulting test statistic was the remarkable small $T = 0.0132$, a quantile corresponding to a significant level in excess of $\alpha > 90\%$. The rather lesser value implied absolutely no conceivable statistical reason to refuse the null hypothesis of equal partaking probabilities. To grasp an idea of how much small it represents, consider that the typical $\alpha = 5\%$ quantile would require $T > 3.841$ for a null hypothesis refusal.

The same test statistic is prone to an alternative interpretation. It can be regarded in terms of measuring the *independence* in a single sampling between two criteria – in case, the 1st or 2nd draws and the adherence or noncompliance. Therefore, at least statistically, there was no reason to doubt the adherence homogeneity between the two student samplings or their mutual independence. At the same time, the qualitative comparison of answers from the two batches did not show any detectable trend deviation. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods reassures both (Flick, 2004). Thus, the two batches of respondents were henceforth combined in a single one consisting of 64 subjects. All succeeding analyses were performed without further distinction of the student samplings.

Finally, triangulation of investigators was used in analyzing the questionnaire data acquired from the tutors and the students. For both data groups (tutors and students), the responses were firstly analyzed independently by two of the authors. Once this step was concluded, the third author compared and related the analyses.

A. Tenorio; T. Loos; T. Tenório

Perceptions of tutors and students on affectivity and conflict mediation in an e learning course for the Brazilian police

Convergences, inconsistences and contradictions were carefully considered and pointed out. Then, the resulting analysis was revised independently again by the first two authors before its consensual final form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the tutors in the study, affectivity would help especially to encourage collaboration in the learning process (Table 1), probably because it favours the construction of bonds. The result is among the same lines as those of Dorjó (2011) and Monteiro, Alves, Laurino, Moura and Vaniel (2014). With the exception of tutor A, the others thought that affectivity would incorporate multiple benefits for group life and for teaching and learning in the VLE. It would especially favour collaboration in the learning process. On the other hand, it would be less relevant for the development of a student protagonist role and for making the VLE more informal.

Table 1. Perceptions of tutors and students on the importance of affectivity in the course VLE

Perceptions on affectivity	Total (%)	
	Tutor	Student
Encourages collaboration in the learning process	86	55
Promotes communication between tutors and students	71	53
Promotes communication between students	71	42
Favours dialogue and exchanges, independently from hierarchy	71	41
Helps in conflict mediation	71	38
Helps to overcome learning difficulties	71	31
Makes the atmosphere more informal	43	28
Favours the role of protagonist for students (develops autonomy)	43	20
'Affectivity is not important in an VLE, much less for military people'	-	2
'It facilitates learning for a military person that cannot study, as one has to do outside jobs to keep one's family, but has to be serious'	-	2

N. B. One student left all options blank. The options set between inverted commas were added by the survey subjects as a supplement to the "Other" option.

Most of the students also considered manifestations of affectivity in VLE as important as they encouraged collaboration in the learning process (35; 55%) and promoted communication between tutors and students (34; 53%) (Table 1). Another prominent data item was the notion held by many survey subjects (26; 41%) that affectivity would favour dialogue and exchanges, notwithstanding the hierarchy, a possibly positive element in the VLE of a military institution. These notions converge with those of most of the tutors (Table 1).

Most of the students (24; 38%) and tutors (5) (Table 1) saw affectivity as an important item in conflict mediation, too. But for the students, as well as for the tutors, developing a protagonist role (13; 20%) and making the VLE more informal (18; 28%) were seen as less relevant items (Table 1).

In the perception of the tutors on the interactions with the students, more than half saw them as respectful, objective and friendly (Table 2), which was coherent with the fact that the course attendants themselves found their relationships with their peers satisfactory. Respectful conducts are valued in the military environment. Notwithstanding that, mutual respect is needed for the development of affectivity, as said by Monteiro et al. (2014), Tenório et al. (2014a, 2014b) and Mendes et al. (2015).

Ceccon et al. (2009) pointed that social life would be riddled with conflict. Six tutors considered conflicts rare amongst VLE students. However, survey subject G, the only one that saw the relationship between the students as poor, stated that conflicts amongst students were common, despite his assessment of the relations that existed between them as ethical, respectful, formal, objective, and succinct (Table 2).

Table 2. Perceptions on the interactions between students in the course VLE

Interactions between students	Total (%)	
	Tutor	Student
Friendly	57	64
Respectful	86	56
Objective	57	36
Ethical	43	25
Motivating	29	25
Relaxed	29	23
Formal	29	19
Succinct	14	9
Empathic	29	5
Conflicting	0	5
Indifferent	0	3
'There was no interaction because we had no access'	-	2

N. B. Two students marked no option. The option set between inverted commas was added by a survey subject as a supplement to the "Other" option.

When interfering in a students' conflict the preferred manner would be to mediate in an impartial, friendly, and firm way, or stimulate the communication so that the parties could reach an agreement. No tutor allowed the students to sort

things amongst themselves (Table 3). The attitudes are aligned with studies such as that of Ceccon et al. (2009). They also comply with the guidelines of Community Police (Department of Justice, 2012), which name the conflict mediator as a third party that facilitates the dialogue between the parties, aimed at a settlement.

For students, the interaction with the colleagues in the VLE were generally friendly (41; 64%) and respectful (36; 56%), an opinion similar to that of the tutors (Table 2). A student respondent said there had been no interaction due to a lack of access to the VLE, differently from the data in the replies from the tutors and other students (Table 2). The reason for that was not identified, however. The same respondent went on to say that only booklets, instead of other ICTs, were used in the course.

A significant number of students (55; 86%) said that the conflicts with colleagues were rare, probably because they maintained friendly and respectful relations – a data item similar to that obtained in the tutor sample (Table 2). Only one student believed conflicts were common.

As almost all the students responded, in the event of a conflict between peers, the tutor took up the role of mediator (Table 3). The value of mediation in conflict resolution has been pointed by Ceccon et al. (2009). Similarly to that reported by the tutors, the students saw the actions of mediation as impartial, friendly and firm (30; 47%) (Table 3) or expected them to be so in a first event. This result shows the understanding of the students on the need of affectivity in conflict mediation in the VLE.

Table 3. Tutor action in the event of conflicts between students in course VLE

Tutor action in the event of conflicts between students	Total (%)	
	Tutor	Student
Seek to mediate the conflict in an impartial, friendly and firm manner	71	47
Encourage communication so that the parties can reach an agreement	57	22
Recommend compliance with conduct in a military environment	14	17
Reprehend all parties involved in a reserved manner	14	14
Analyse the fact and apply Disciplinary Rules of the Military Police	0	14
Ask the students involved to reconsider their positions, after reminding all of the common values and interests, to reduce the differences between the parties and increase affinity, based on the similarities.	29	13
Analyse the fact to take a side with whomever is right	0	13
Suggest the closing of the conflict and hint at the intention of reporting it to a superior officer	14	11
Publicly reprehend all parties involved	14	6
Reprehend all parties involved according to principles of hierarchy and discipline	0	5

Tutor action in the event of conflicts between students	Total (%)	
	Tutor	Student
Leave the students to sort it out themselves	0	5
Leave the students to sort it out themselves, pursuant to hierarchical principles	0	2
Seek to boost the protagonist roles of those involved in the conflict, so that they see themselves as parts of the conflict and of its solution	14	0
Intervene differently, according to the degree of affinity with each party	0	0

N. B. The subjects in the survey could mark as many options as needed.

For the tutors, the interactions between them and the students were described positively, as friendly, respectful, and objective (Table 4), and even by subjects C and G who thought they had a poor relationship with the students. They possibly attributed the lack of proximity to the course attendants. No one saw the interactions as conflicting or indifferent, though. The interactions that took place exclusively between students were perceived in a similar way by the tutors (Table 2). Barbosa and Rezende (2004), based on the perceptions of 67 tutors in a nursing course, pointed the relevance of affectivity in tutor-student relation at distance.

Four tutors subjected to the survey said there were conflicts between tutors and students in the VLE, despite the fact that the interactions were generally friendly and respectful (Table 4). Conflicts between students were described as more common, probably because the tutor, an educator and higher-ranking officer, exercised, albeit in a subliminal way, a position of authority in the VLE.

Table 4. Perceptions on the interactions between tutors and students in the course VLE

Interactions between tutors and students	Total (%)	
	Tutor	Student
Friendly	86	52
Respectful	86	52
Objective	86	48
Ethical	57	38
Formal	43	20
Motivating	71	16
Indifferent	0	6
Empathic	14	5
Succinct	14	5
Relaxed	0	5
Conflicting	0	2

N. B. Two students marked no option.

A. Tenorio; T. Loos; T. Tenório

Perceptions of tutors and students on affectivity and conflict mediation in an e learning course for the Brazilian police

According to Tenório et al. (2014b) and Mendes et al. (2015), the interactions with the students would depend on the type of conduct displayed by the tutor in the VLE, with friendly attitudes and the induction of mutual respect being important affective actions. According to those attending the courses, the interactions with the tutors in the VLE were usually respectful (33; 52%), friendly (33; 52%), and objective (31; 48%), a perfectly reciprocal view to that of the tutors on the students (Table 4).

According to a significant share of students (50; 78%) conflicts with the tutor were not common. Some reported eventual (9) or frequent (5) occurrences though. On the other hand, only one tutor reported experiencing occasional conflicts with students. The students reported that conflicts were more common with the tutors than amongst students – a perception opposite to that of the tutors.

Table 5. Tutors perceptions on the best courses of action to solve conflicts between a tutor and a student

Procedures to solve conflicts between a tutor and a student	Tutor							Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Seek conciliation and consensus through dialogue	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	7
Patiently explain the need to overcome the causes of the conflict	x			x		x		3
Reflect in a self-critical way on one's share of responsibility in the causes of the conflict			x		x		x	3
Re-establish dialogue with the student through friendly language so to give the student the sensation of proximity with one's tutor		x	x		x			3
Re-establish dialogue and allow the student to feel as part of the solution process.	x					x	x	3
Step away from the conflict to try to be impartial, whilst respecting the point-of-view of the student		x		x				2
Tutor imposes rank authority								0
Listening to the criticism and try to adjust one's own attitude								0
Reprehend the student in a reserved manner according to principles of hierarchy and discipline								0
Publicly reprehend the student according to principles of hierarchy and discipline								0
Recommend compliance with conduct in a military environment								0
Analyse the fact and apply Police Disciplinary Rules								0
Suggest the closing of the conflict and hint at the intention of reporting it to a superior officer								0

A. Tenorio; T. Loos; T. Tenório

Perceptions of tutors and students on affectivity and conflict mediation in an e learning course for the Brazilian police

Procedures to solve conflicts between a tutor and a student	Tutor							Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Seek a temporary mediator to assist with conflict resolution								0
Ignore the existence of the conflict								0

N. B. Each survey subject was allowed a maximum of three options.

For all the tutors, the best way to solve conflicts with students would be to seek conciliation and consensus via dialogue. Three of them acknowledged that re-establishing dialogue with the use of friendly language was still needed (Table 5). According to Tenório et al. (2014a), the friendly attitude of the tutor would help to avoid conflicts. Despite their acting as mediators in conflicts between students (Table 3), none considered necessary to seek a temporary mediator to help with occurrences between a tutor and a student (Table 5), contradicting the guidelines of Community Police (Department of Justice, 2012). Perhaps the tutors' perceptions on being able to solve conflicts with students through dialoguing without a temporary mediator were due to the infrequency of such situations.

Most of the students (36; 56%) saw "ethics" as fundamental in VLE debates. Without it, and despite different opinions, conflicts could occur. Another important generating factor of the conflict pointed by the respondents would be where a colleague would always assume to be right (27; 42%) (Table 6). These results show the value of acceptance and of mutual respect – primordial forms of consolidation for affectivity in the teaching-learning process in a VLE.

Table 6. Conflict-generating situation amongst colleagues in the course VLE according to students' perceptions

Conflict-generating situation amongst colleagues	Total students
Colleague has a different opinion and does not accept to discuss the issue in an ethical manner	56 %
Colleague assumes to be always right	42 %
Lack of affinity with colleague	14 %
Colleague does not perform course activities	13 %
Colleague takes advantage of friendship with the tutor	11 %

N. B. Each survey subject was allowed a maximum of two options.

For the tutors surveyed, friendship was regarded as one of the main features of an affective kind of the tutor, capable of helping with conflict mediation in VLEs (Table 7). Tenório et al. (2014a) and Campos et al. (2014) also described friendship as a necessary element for a good living experience in e-learning.

Table 7. Perceptions of tutors and students on the main features of tutor affectivity that can help reduce or mediate conflicts in the VLE

Features of tutor affectivity	Total (%)	
	Tutor	Student
Being friendly	71	56
Being ethical	43	41
Promoting mediation in a participative and flexible manner	57	23
Being a pacifier	14	23
Being empathic (place myself in the student's position and understand one's needs)	57	20
Being helpful	29	17
Being dedicated	14	14
Promote mutual acceptance and the overcoming of conflicts provoked by idiosyncrasies	0	13
Being serious	0	13
Being attentive	14	11
Being communicative	0	9

N. B. Each survey subject was allowed a maximum of three options. One student left all options blank.

All student respondents saw tutor affectivity capable of reducing the occurrence, and assisting in the mediation of conflicts (Table 7). This perception is aligned with previous remarks (Table 1). For many students (36; 56%) friendship would be the main feature expected in a tutor. The tutors shared this view (Table 7).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As important as modernising the didactic resources and strategies employed in the teaching-learning process, e-learning requires the establishment of healthy interpersonal relations, in order to facilitate the construction of knowledge. In adopting e-learning in a professional domain, it is also good to capture the corporative feeling of the employees.

The State Police forces in all Brazil use the e-learning way for professional promotion and to spread knowledge, with the aim of leading their troops towards better performance in their daily chores, almost always facing urban violence. The role of tutor affectivity in the sergeant course offered by the Virtual School of Professional Qualification of the Military Police of a Brazilian state was investigated, considering the institutional relations that exist between the higher-ranking officers and those under their command.

A. Tenorio; T. Loos; T. Tenório

Perceptions of tutors and students on affectivity and conflict mediation in an e learning course for the Brazilian police

The perceptions of tutors and students were studied focussing on the interactions that take place in the VLE, and on the factors involved in the construction of bonds, on the different forms of conflict mediation, and on the influence of affectivity in such mediation.

Fifteen tutors and a thousand and two hundred students in the course were invited to take part in the survey, but only seven of the former and sixty-four of the latter filled in the Google Forms questionnaire. A similar perception was found in both the groups surveyed on the importance of affectivity in the VLE. The interactions between students, and with tutors, were generally seen as respectful and friendly.

Conflicts in the VLE were seen as rare or non-existent by most, and in both groups. However, oddly enough, the students thought conflicts were more common with the tutors than amongst themselves, a view opposite to that of the tutors. In the perception of the tutors, the best way to solve conflicts with students would be to seek conciliation and consensus via dialogue. Although recommended in an occurrence involving the tutor him/herself, none considered necessary to seek a temporary mediator to intervene.

Both students and tutors believed that the best attitude in eventual conflicts between students in the VLE would be the tutor to take the role of mediator, along with an impartial, friendly, and firm attitude, despite the fact that most of them never experienced the situation. For the students, the most probable cause of conflict between colleagues would be divergences in opinions and ethical extrapolation in debates. Friendship would be the main social and affective competence in the pedagogical work, to reduce or mediate conflicts in the VLE.

Given the interest of the Institution surveyed to modernise the pedagogical practices as it incorporated e-learning as a means of upgrading and refreshing the qualification of their professionals, one can infer on the need to take the administrators and the educators to think on the role of affectivity in the teaching-learning process. In a future work, the contents of forums of the disciplines could be analysed to achieve a better understanding of how the interactions take place in a military VLE.

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