Chapter VIII

Teachers, Tutors, and Mentors: New Roles or Professionals?

Paolo Ardizzone
Catholic University of Milan, Italy

Pier Cesare Rivoltella
Catholic University of Milan, Italy

Abstract*

The goal of this chapter is to describe the main transformations of our Information Society and to show how these kinds of transformations are changing teaching roles in schools and universities. Particularly, the focus is on teachers and tutors in online education: the first ones are gradually passing from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side” (of the learner) and understanding that their job is no longer individual, because their activities are much more staff activities; the second ones are really important because the learner, in an online environment, needs more than in presence to be helped from the cognitive and emotive point of view. The chapter provides a description of the main activities of these professionals: organization, knowledge and experience sharing, and evaluation. In conclusion, we try to indicate some problems whose importance decision makers should consider.

Copyright © 2006, Idea Group Inc. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of Idea Group Inc. is prohibited.
The Challenge of Complexity:  
From Teacher to Staff

The Information Society, according to the point of view of philosophers and sociologists (Baudrillard, 1976; Castells, 2001; Feenberg, 1999), is characterized by a new centrality of symbolic goods: these kinds of immaterial goods (images, knowledge, cultural products) find their value in what they represent, and not in what they are.

The effect, in the last few years, is the birth and development of a new class of workers that the French sociologist Erik Neveu (2001) names “workers of the symbolic,” actualizing what Peter Drucker (1965) has already defined as “knowledge workers”: their specialization isn’t the production of anything, but the building and circulation of meanings.

Communication professionals (journalists, PR, television workers), tourist and culture operators, and people working in the digital economy also belong in this category.

They have three main characteristics:

1. They are “low definition professionals” because they are space- and time-independent: they can work in their house, out of regular work time.
2. They are hybrid figures, because they need a strong integration of disparate competencies (informatics, marketing, communication, course design, etc.).
3. They work with great flexibility, according to the needs of the companies, consumers, and projects on which they are working.

This worker profile is also the same for that particular category of knowledge workers who work in e-learning and in the application of ICTs in education. In fact, in this case, the core component (technology, materials) is not enough to explain and describe the teaching and learning process; value is found into what people are able to do with technology.

Starting from the job descriptions of the staff of Texas University1 (and synthesizing its very analytical plan), it is possible to describe these workers by referencing to two types of variables: according to the role/function they play, we can distinguish management figures, administration figures, and intermediation figures; according to the educative actions they do, we can talk about professionals involved in organization, interaction and evaluation/assessment.

The interaction between these two sets of variables is summarized in Figure 1.