

Trust and Conflicts in Distance Learning Higher Education Courses Tutor Teams

Aline Pereira Soares¹, Marina Keiko Nakayama¹, Ricardo Azambuja Silveira¹,
Andressa Sasaki Vasques Pacheco¹, Patrícia de Sá Freire¹ and Kelly Benetti¹

¹ Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, UFSC, Programa de Pós Graduação em Engenharia e Gestão do Conhecimento – PPEGC/UFSC - Bairro Trindade - Florianópolis - Caixa-Postal: 476 - Santa Catarina - CEP 88040-970 – Brazil
{Aline.Pereira.Soares, Marina.Keiko.Nakayama, Ricardo.Azambuja.Silveira, Andressa.Sasaki.Vasques.Pacheco, Patrícia.de.Sá.Freire, Kelly. Benetti}
alinepsoares@yahoo.com.br

Abstract. This study reports on research carried out on 105 tutors working on distance graduate courses at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) to assess the relationship between the level of trust and the conflict management in tutors of distance learning based graduate courses at UFSC on the AVEA - Virtual Environment of Learning. The research uses descriptive and quantitative methodology. It should be highlighted that the level of trust of the whole team prevails in the relationships, which explains the adoption of the Integration style, considered the most appropriate for creative solutions in moments of conflict.

Keywords: Distance Education, AVEA - Virtual Environment of Learning, Trust, Conflict, Tutors team

1. Introduction

Modern organizations are faced with constantly-changing environments which cause significant alterations in the way in which they were, are and will be administered. The uncertainties provoked by the Information Revolution process, deregulation and the new management models, are the great challenge that individuals, organizations and society have to confront on a daily basis. Contact with phenomena such as information volatility and constant pressure, has been changing old paradigms set in place since the industrial society and which are modifying individual concepts and generating the constant feeling of anxiety, stress and conflicts.

From this line of thought, the models used to manage teams, competencies, work processes and organizational knowledge, need to be put in evidence and corrected so that conflicts becomes an opportunity for reorganization and adaptability of the system. It is also important to mention that the rise in new concepts for organizational climate improvement are increasingly dependent on

the sharing of tacit knowledge among the people and its transformation into explicit knowledge, associated with the sustainability of the system.

In organizational environments, conflict is inevitable, specifically in Higher Education Institutions – IES - which implemented Distance Learning Education as a practice to promote a form of education accessible to many, and one which consequently faces processes of constant change. However, if organizational agents learn to identify and manage possible conflicts which may arise within this process and use these as matrices to solve problems [13], the managers can learn extensively about the system into which they have been placed. In addition to combining explicit knowledge – generally produced by the Higher Education Institutions – IES - and sent to the Centers; to the tacit [9] – the knowledge resulting from daily, regional experience of the on-site Centers.

This paper presents an empirical research with the tutors team of Brazilian Open University Project (Universidade Aberta do Brasil -UAB) in partnership with the Federal University of Santa Catarina (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), which has been working with distance learning since 1995. The partnership between UFSC and the Open University of Brazil (UAB) was extended to all over the country. In February 2008, several graduate courses were set up with a big team called Distance Tutors (working at UFSC) and On-site Tutors (working at the attended towns). This team constitute the universe of this research.



Fig 1 UFSC sites: cities where the graduate distance learning courses are available

The Federal University of Santa Catarina offered graduate courses in Administration, Biology, Accountancy, Economic Science, Philosophy, Spanish, Portuguese, Physics, Mathematics and LIBRAS (Brazilian Signals Language), in more than 30 cities and towns in several Brazilian states, catering for approximately 6000 students and employing 130 teachers and 230 tutors. This includes those who work in the Centers (on-site) and those who work at UFSC (distance learning) The partnership with the UAB involves approximately 50 public, Brazilian, higher education institutions involved in about 200 courses in

300 centers. Fig 1 shows the cities where the graduate distance learning courses are available.

The managers of distance education graduate courses perceived the need to train the tutors' team to improve the use of the virtual environment of learning, and to make contact each other to improve their experience and the interaction of the whole team. Another objective was to provide greater contact with the Institution, i.e. acquire a deeper understanding about UFSC and what it represents to the country, in order to integrate the work of a team comprised of 105 people from different Brazilian states. It is important to highlight that this need emerged because all 105 participants were selected by the city council of the town where they live, and the course was the first formal direct contact with UFSC.

This study aims to present research carried out with this team of tutors from different Brazilian states to evaluate the level of trust and to identify the posture adopted by this public in the relationship and in situations where there are differences and conflicts with the UFSC team.

As has been emphasized, the integration of the team is an important factor for the coordinators of different universities, and equally important for the managers of the national project (UAB). With a view to these necessities, the study addresses the following research questions: What is the relation between trust and the posture adopted by the tutors when these find themselves in situations of differences (conflicts) between their own perspectives and those which are demanded by the directives of the distance graduate course at UFSC?

2. Background

2.1 Distance Education Team

The work process in Distance Education requires a multidisciplinary team with different competences: staff specialized in the areas of involvement such as the course, coordinators, specialized technicians, instructional designers, graphic designers, monitors, inspectors and tutors.

The Distance Tutor is an educator who coordinates the selection of content, discusses strategies and establishes a dialog with the student. He suggests, provokes thought and supports. This type of tutor is a virtual teacher who contributes to the development of the student. The tutor has the role of developing strategies which facilitate learning and which point the way towards enabling the student to learn in a collaborative and autonomous way and to reach his learning objectives.

According to Landim [6], the Distance Tutor should possess some basic qualities such as: authenticity, emotional stability and maturity, have a good character and a healthy sense of life, self knowledge, intelligence, mental, cultural and social agility, trust in others, cultural concern and broad interests, leadership, cordiality and the ability to listen.

Diverse concepts exist for the definition of a tutor's duties but one for the tutor's role would be to be understood as a global, guiding action, key to articulating instruction and education [6]. According to this author, the tutorial system involves a combination of educational actions which contribute to the development of the student's basic abilities, guiding them in their intellectual growth and autonomy.

The local or On-site Tutor also plays an important part in the stimulation of the student's learning process. Although he is not responsible for content decisions, he does have the responsibility to keep the student informed and motivated as he is the link between the Institution and the student. According to the Secretary of Distance Education [12], the role of the tutor in a local Center is that of an "academic guide, sufficiently qualified at higher level, responsible for providing assistance to the students at the Center, accompanying and guiding them in all their activities involved in the teaching-learning process". As the local tutor resides in the same city as the students, he should be in a position to better understand the student's needs and transmit this reality to the distance management team.

In corroboration with this statement, the Secretary of Distance Education The Ministry of Education [12] states that, through studies carried out, the local center makes the student's stay viable because it creates a link between the IES and the student, which favors regional customization of the course. In other words, tutoring is important in the orientation, direction and supervision of the teaching-learning process.

Tutoring can be divided into two or more categories according to the perspective provided by Fidalgo and Mill [4], as can be seen in Table 1:

Table 5. Tutor Categories Source: Fidalgo and Mill [4]

Virtual Tutors	Local or Presential Tutors
Responsible for the pedagogic accompaniment of a group of students and, or, a group of presential tutors, through virtual technology. This is a specialist in his subject area and is entirely subordinate to the subject coordinator.	rResponsible for the accompaniment of a group of course students (in all subjects). He is not, necessarily, a specialist in any subject area of the course and his role is slightly more than assisting the students in their contact with the virtual tutor and with the institution.

2.2 Trust and conflicts

The theoretical review reports the subject "trust" under three basic references: reduction in "vulnerability" [3]; with a base in "positive expectation" generating "reciprocity" – reducing in this way the opportunism and vulnerability generated from interactions. For example, the understood probability of loss, when interpreted by a manager, is a key factor in the behavior of trust. This emphasizes an undeniable historical knowledge, which raises positive expectations about another team. Additionally, a strong collection of specialized books has

highlighted the importance of positive interaction between teams, which raises the level of trust.

Despite the fact that the behavior of trust is a specific domain [15] and needs to be understood within an exact context, it is the result of a team's experiences in certain conditions which, despite not being confident on their own, help to build a base for the development of trust [7]. According to Kee and Knox [5], competence and incentives are the essential elements of trust. More recently, Butler [1] pointed out a scenario which comprises 10 basic elements important for the building of trust between teams. These are: availability, competence, consistency, discretion, impartiality, integrity, loyalty, openness, achievement and receptivity.

According to the survey conducted by Nakayama, Binotto and Pilla [8], the principal conditions for the building of trust between teams in organizational contexts can be listed as: reliable behavior, demonstration of ability, information sharing, demonstration of concern for others and, finally, demonstration of harmony. In other words, once these conditions are present the chances of conflict lessen. Concerns about issues including problems of communication, inadequate acceptance and poor administration can lead to conflict [11].

Reliable behavior affects the credibility of the person or system involved-systematic credibility is generated by the demonstration of a stable process and behavior. Thus, predictable and positive behavior becomes reliable. The demonstration of ability on the part of the team is directly proportional to their ability to be trusted [7], as demonstrating competence, power, ability and the knowledge to do what needs to be done, will instill security and trust in the mutual relationship [1]. However, the sharing of information among other meanings, indicates the willingness to be open and receptive mentally [1]. The demonstration of concern, according to Mayer [7] signifies the team's belief that the other group will not take advantage of them dishonestly, as it goes beyond unselfish behavior. It is to be genuinely interested and, first and foremost, to take the other's happiness into consideration. Moving on to the behavior of the demonstration of harmony which, according to Nakayama, Binotto and Pilla [8], means that, in the professional relationship, a mixture of feelings, interests, opinions, objectives and values exist which are balanced out and resemble each other, between belonging to one group or another.

The schools that study conflict management in organizations are divided into three views: the first refers to the Structuralist school (in the '30s and '40s), the second is the school of Human relations ('40s until mid '70s) and the third is the Interactionist school (until the present day) [11]. The oldest (and first) approach to conflict stems from the belief that all conflict is bad. It is seen and associated as a synonym for "violence, destruction and irrationality" [11] reinforcing the negative aspect. This is the view of the Structuralist school- that they are behaviors which reflect the behavior and events of the '30s and '40s. In this context, conflict was considered a disturbance resulting from the lack of trust, communication problems and lack of opportunity for discussion. Despite this being an "older" view, many companies currently treat conflict as something that should be avoided and even eliminable.

From the end of the '40s until the '70s, the Human Relations theory dominated the theories about conflict. It considered conflict as something inherent to any process of socialization and that, if managed correctly, can be of some benefit to the organization. In comparison to the School of Human Relations, the Interactionist school has a completely opposite view: conflict should be stimulated so that the organization does not become complacent, apathetic and unfavorable towards learning, creation and innovation. For this School, therefore, the role of leader is to maintain a minimum level of conflict in order to stimulate the group and maintain a level of self-criticism which is favorable to innovations. A group without conflict may be a sign of immobility in organizational results [2].

3. Methodological Procedures

The study can be characterized as descriptive, documental, bibliographical, theoretical and empirical, and the approach can be classified as predominantly quantitative. In this research the primary data were collected from the 105 local tutors during the training course held at UFSC. The questionnaire consisted of 10 closed questions (on conflict management) randomly arranged, with a scale of verbal evaluation and 1 open question on trust, thus totaling 11 questions.

Following data collection, there was a section on treatment. The data obtained from the closed questions were treated statistically through descriptive analysis with the use of measurements like frequency, average and standard deviation. The use of average descriptive unit was opted for using the Likert scale (1 to 5) for a comparison of the terms. This average, it should be stressed, has a minimum value of 1 (I totally disagree) and maximum value of 5 (I totally agree), therefore the higher the score/ value, the more the interviewee agreed with the statement.

The questionnaire used was based on the ROCI-II, Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory – II, which was developed in 1983 by Rahim [10]. In accordance with the exposed theoretical foundation, the ROCI-II evaluates which type of conflict management is more adequate for a team: evasion, settling, integration, negotiation or domination. The original questionnaire in English has 28 statements. However, during the elaboration of the pilot, the number of questions was reduced (using the SPSS program when applying Pearson's Correlation Coefficient Test), during which the original questionnaire (pre test) was given to 35 tutors and very similar questions were verified in the Brazilian standard (resulting in the filling out becoming tiring). Consequently, the number of questions chosen was 10, in accordance with results from the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient Test.

3.1 Research Findings

The results from this research were analyzed in the way they are presented in Table 2, which shows the questionnaire results for the local tutors' perception of the posture adopted in situations of conflict – in which differences are perceived

between what UFSC determines (explicit questions) and the values (tacit questions) of each presential tutor within their everyday reality. It is important to highlight that questions A and C correspond to the Integration style; questions B and G – the Evasion style; D and J – Settling style; E and I – the Domination style and F and H –the Negotiation style.

Table 6. Identification of the type of Conflict Management by/ of tutors

Statements	Average	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5
I try to work with team colleagues to find solutions to problems that meet their expectations	4,7	0,63	1%	1,9%	1,9%	17,1%	78,1%
I usually give in to the consensus of the group I interact with	4,1	0,76	-	6,7%	6,7%	59%	27,7%
I negotiate with my work group in order to attain objectives	4,8	0,42	-	-	1%	19%	80%
I avoid confrontations with the people from the group I interact with	4,2	1,14	4,8%	7,6%	2,9%	31,4%	53,3%
I sometimes make use of my position to solve a situation in which there is competition	3,5	1,13	11,4%	12,4%	14,3%	36,2%	27,5%
I try to find an intermediary solution to solve an impasse	4,2	0,96	1,9%	8,6%	1,9%	37,1%	50,5%
In general, I accept the aspirations of the colleagues of the group with which I work.	4,2	0,66	-	3,8%	5,7%	51,4%	39%
I normally propose intermediary solutions to avoid obstacles in discussions	4,2	0,86	1%	6,7%	3,8%	45,7%	42,8%
I use my abilities techniques my favor in the decisions.	3,8	1,13	9,5%	10,4%	10,4%	33,3%	36,2%
I try to keep my disagreements with private people of the group to prevent conflicts.	3,8	1,29	9,5%	10,5%	5,7%	35,2%	39%

It can be seen that the predominant style adopted by the group is Integration (with an average of 4,8 and standard deviation of 4,7) and that the lowest numbers refer to the Domination style. That is, according to Thomas [14] and Rahim [10], the team wants theirs and the IES's demands to be met, as they demonstrate a concern for their own interests and for those of UFSC. The same authors also

believe that the team is more inclined to come up with creative solutions especially in situations of long term planning, political and strategic objectives of UFSC.

In relation to the question of trust, the tutors were questioned on the evaluation of this among the UFSC group using AVEA, as shown in Table 3. Suggestions were sought for improvement in the relationship of trust. It can be seen that this was generally classified as good and great (25%). The other quotes refer to the relation between a good communication using AVEA and the high level of trust resulting from clear and continuous communication among the local tutors and managers of UFSC. Another point that stands out with 8.6% of the opinions is the importance of face to face meetings which, according to the interviewees, increase trust through direct contact. This is in line with Zand [15] and Butler [1] when they emphasize the importance of positive interaction among teams which consequently raises the level of trust. It can be seen that, according to Mayer et al. [7], the compatibility of beliefs and values (through the means of Integration when conflict can be minimized) are characteristics which suggest the presence of trust in the group studied. It should be highlighted that other suggestions were made, such as: the need to improve contact by using AVEA and the implementation of other tools (such as MSN, for example) and more contact with the teachers. The analysis of the Relation of Trust among the UFSC group through the virtual learning environment with the main quotes can be seen in Table 3.

Table 7. Relation of Trust through the virtual learning environment

Variable mentioned by the interviewees in the open question	Statements	N° Absolute	%
Trust	Good	13	12,4%
	Great / Very good	13	12,4%
Virtual Learning Environment	<u>Better communication by interaction with the use of AVEA</u> – Trust should be absolute as the task of tutoring pelo AVEA requires good results / <u>success in group communication</u> AVEA / As much as possible, I try to re(transmit) information clearly. Improve through <u>daily contact</u> with the presential tutors and/ or coordinators / <u>The tool is opening our visions up to a new world</u> / <u>In order to have trust, it is necessary to know the tools of the job!</u> / <u>Motivating, interacting and communicating clearly always</u>	15	14,3%
Communication	<u>Good trust. Communication</u> – could be improved through systemizations of chats per center./ Installing MSN to further help interaction / Trust is acquired through contact with the	15	14,3%

	group. <u>More contact with the professors is necessary</u> to improve our work/ the distance is enormous, there should be more contact /what needs to improve is communication /I trust the group that interacts with AVEA. But I believe that we should explore this environment further./it can be <u>improved through knowledge and training of the tools available</u>		
Live interaction and training courses meeting	<u>Better communication by interaction from presential contact through training – frequent contact./ meetings allow for greater interaction</u> (There is absolute trust, I have no doubt about this but to improve, it is only through these meetings as it is in these that questions arise through interaction among all the components /	9	8,6%
TOTAL number of interviewees		105	100%

In general, it can be seen that the relation between a good level of trust achieved through the information available and received from AVEA (main means of communication and communication between UFSC and the Presential Centers) and the positioning of the team of Tutors in relation to the positioning of Integration in the face of situations of conflict.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The educational process driven by the EAD is a reality which tends to increase specifically due to the size and geographical dispersal of the country. Thus, studies on team behavior become fundamental in order to potentialize IES strategies. As the research has shown, the relation of trust and positioning of interaction is very present in the team studied, since by using AVEA (and other technologies) the management of the course is able to transmit information and strategies in a way that the group of local tutors can trust and transmit to the students. It can also be concluded that participants emphasize the importance of local contact during training, since by understanding the whole structure of AVEA and UFSC better (and how they work), they can intensify the relationship of trust with the course. In accordance with the theoretical foundation presented, the reciprocity, positive expectation and predictability are fundamental concepts for the participants to feel security (and trust) with regard to the risk of negative consequences and vulnerability. The type of conflict management indentified– Integration – is also a consequence of the actions resulting from the trust among its members- what possibly favors this scenario is the adequate use of means of communication used by the graduate course of administration at UFSC. This is in addition to the Tutors perceiving the presential meeting as a strategy that drives such behaviors.

In this way, it can be seen that the style identified – Integration- as mentioned in Thomas’ model [14], and Rahim [10], allows for better group collaboration as this positioning is fundamental for teams who work geographically apart. It can also propel the subject and the group to create innovative strategies and acquire more knowledge, conquering also the student’s trust in the IES and in the EAD model, which can maximize student’s stay on the course. With the aim of promoting greater integration and collaboration in situations of conflict, the group of local tutors balance their own interests with those of the Institution, especially because there are more chances of finding differentiated solutions which contribute so that planning, politics and strategic objectives can be attained.

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