UNIVERSITY TUTORING IN PERIODS OF ACADEMIC INTERRUPTION: A REPORT FROM EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The social crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic represent periods of academic interruption that will affect the learning of Higher Education. Given this panorama, university tutors will acquire relevance as a strategy to be able to face this crisis and allow an exchange of experiences and emotions. The objective of this report is to present a tutorial strategy developed between the years of 2019 and 2020, in the context of an academic and psychoeducational support program of a state university in Chile. This strategy consists of six phases: (1) Initial meeting; (2) Diagnosis; (3) Planning; (4) Implementation; (5) Evaluation; (6) Close the process. The development of this proposal demonstrated the emotions importance, dialogue and the valorization of the student's experience in their learning process and adaptation to the university. In addition, it provides an action framework for academic and psychoeducational support linked to university tutoring programs.

Keywords: university environment; educational psychology; emotions

Tutorías universitarias en períodos de interrupción académica: un relato desde la experiencia

RESUMEN

Las crisis sociales y la pandemia por COVID-19 representan períodos de interrupción académica que han impactado en el aprendizaje de la educación superior. Ante este panorama, las tutorías universitarias adquieren relevancia como una estrategia para poder afrontar estas crisis y permitir el intercambio de experiencias y emociones. El objetivo de este reporte consiste en presentar una estrategia tutorial diseñada entre los años 2019 y 2020, en el contexto de un programa de acompañamiento académico y psicoeducativo de una universidad estatal de Chile. Esta estrategia consta de seis fases: (1) Encuentro inicial; (2) Diagnóstico; (3) Planificación; (4) Implementación; (5) Evaluación; (6) Cierre del proceso. El desarrollo de esta propuesta demostró la importancia de las emociones, el diálogo y la valoración experiencial del estudiante en su proceso de aprendizaje y adaptación a la universidad. Asimismo, entrega un marco de acción para el acompañamiento académico y psicoeducativo ligado a los programas de tutorías universitarias.

Palabras clave: ambiente universitario; psicología educacional; emociones

Tutorias universitárias em períodos de interrupção acadêmica: um relato a partir da experiência

RESUMO

As crises sociais e a pandemia por COVID-19 representam períodos de interrupção acadêmica que impactaram na aprendizagem da educação superior. Ante este panorama, as tutorias universitárias adquirem relevância como uma estratégia para poder afrontar estas crises e permitir o intercâmbio de experiências e emoções. O objetivo deste artigo consiste em apresentar uma estratégia tutorial desenhada entre os anos 2019 e 2020, no contexto de um programa de acompanhamento acadêmico e psicoeducativo de uma universidade estatal do Chile. Esta estratégia consta de seis fases: (1) Encontro inicial; (2) Diagnóstico; (3) Planejamento; (4) Implementação; (5) Avaliação; (6) Encerramento do processo. O desenvolvimento desta proposta demonstrou a importância das emoções, o diálogo e a valorização experiencial do estudante em seu processo de aprendizagem e adaptação à universidade. Igualmente, entrega um marco de ação para o acompanhamento acadêmico e psicoeducativo ligado aos programas de tutorias universitárias.

Palavras-chave: ambiente universitário; psicologia educacional; emoções

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this report is to present a tutorial strategy designed based on the author's experience as a university tutor in the Psychology career, in an academic and psychoeducational support program, belonging to a state university located in the city of La Serena, Chile. To do this, the main actions carried out will be explained and some final comments will be made about this professional experience.

In the Chilean context, the social state that occurred at the end of 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic generated a series of changes in different aspects of university life (Brunner, Ganga-Contreras, & Labraña-Vargas, 2020; Oyarce, Leihy, & Zegers, 2020). One of the most significant corresponds to the implementation of the remote education modality as a way of continuing with the professional training of thousands of university students and universities (Murphy, 2020), which has generated some negative consequences such as the interruption of learning, unequal access to virtual platforms and high levels of stress (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomaževič, & Umek, 2020; Organization of United Nations for Education, Science and Culture [UNESCO], 2020). In an adverse panorama, tutoring spaces emerge as key strategies to be able to navigate these periods of academic interruption and increase their impact on universities students (Klug & Peralta, 2019).

University tutoring has become a relevant element for the quality of education in higher education institutions (Manuel-Benites, 2020). A large number of universities around the world are putting into practice these spaces for academic and psychoeducational support to favor and enhance the integral development of their students during their professional training in graduate school (Klug & Peralta, 2019). Peer tutoring is defined as a pedagogical and didactic strategy in which students and students assume an active role in their teaching-learning process, from which a relation between tutor and mentee is co-constructed that benefits in a bidirectional manner to both parts of the tutorial space (Benoit-Ríos, Jaramillo-Azema, & Castro-Cáceres, 2019).

The context and characteristics of the tutor's work become an important resource that complements the usual practices of university learning. This is because the next development zone is being taken advantage of, where the most experienced students support their colleagues from earlier years to learn in the collaborative work context, facilitating greater understanding and assimilation of contents, as well as how to improve their academic performance (Filz & Gurung, 2013; Jiménez-Corona et al., 2018; McCavit & Zellner, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). As a result, tutors benefit from this work, as they acquire skills specific to their discipline, increase self-confidence and develop communication skills (Philipp, Tretter, & Rich, 2016).

EXPERIENCE REPORT

The professional experience described in this report was developed in the Programa de Apoyo a la Permanencia, Rendimiento, Nivelación y Desarrollo del Estudiante (APRENDE), belonging to the University of La Serena (ULS) located in the Coquimbo Region, Chile. The purpose of the program is to fully support, at the academic and psychoeducational level, the student community of those in the first years of their university careers who are currently pursuing primary assignments at the fourth level, through the provision of tutorials, group meetings, individual support and vocational advice (APRENDE ULS, 2020).

The tutorials were developed during the period between 2019 and 2020, which included university movements, the social state and the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 10 mentees belonging to the Psychology career will participate in this instance and will address critical assignments per academic semester. Over the past few years, a tutorial strategy consisting of six phases or stages has been designed and used: (1) Initial meeting; (2) Diagnosis; (3) Planning; (4) Implementation; (5) Evaluation; (6) Close the process. The logic of this proposal is based on the fact that these stages are dynamic and not sequential, which allows you to move forward or backward between them depending on the needs that the tutor highlights in his or her professional work. A schematic of the tutorial strategy is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - *Phases that Compose the Tutorial Strategy Prepared in the Professional Experience as a University Tutor in the Psychology Career.*
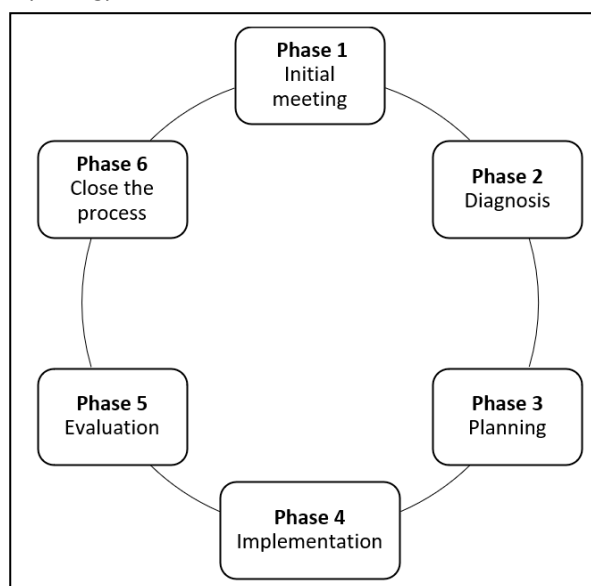
Phase 1: Initial meeting

It corresponds to the *initial meeting* between the figure of the tutor and their respective tutees. Previously, these students accessed the APRENDE ULS Program by filling out an online application form, where they entered contact details, the type of support required (academic and/or psychoeducational) and the critical signatures of the primer at the fourth level of their respective career, from where need support. Once this document has been reviewed, the program proceeds to assign tutors depending on: (a) the availability of these in their careers, (b) the specialty they have in certain assignments and (c) the type of support requested by students. After the registration process, it was decided to join the tutorial groups; one for those tutors who were studying first year assignments, and the other for those who were studying second year assignments in the Psychology career.

As I said above, the main objective of this stage is to meet the student who will receive academic and psychoeducational support within the tutoring space. In order to do this, presentation dynamics will be carried out so that each person can reveal their name, their main hobbies and interests and the expectations they have in relation to the tutor. In the case of the tutor, this was presented to the group of students and carried out a brief framework explaining the program guidelines and the type of support that could be provided, along with inquiring about the psychoeducational and motivational aspects presented to them and the students. This initial stage is essential to begin building a harmonious relationship between tutor and mentee, favoring communication, dialogue and trust between both parties (Benoit-Ríos et al., 2019).

Phase 2: Diagnosis

The purpose of this second phase consisted of developing in a participatory and co-constructed manner a *diagnosis* of the current academic and psychoeducational situation of those tutored. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews will be used with each student to understand their main needs and their learning styles, along with inquiring about their existing emotional state in relation to social state events and the COVID-19 pandemic. The diagnosis revealed that the main need was to increase academic performance to be able to approve critical assignments and that there were high levels of stress and academic demotivation among those tutored.

Phase 3: Planning

With the diagnosis previously carried out, the next phase consisted of *planning* the tutorials to be carried out during the academic semester. Consideration will be given to the number of participating mentees, the number of tutorials, the duration of sessions, critical content to be treated, materials and resources to be used (presentations, study guides, psychoeducational material, videos, clinical cases and group games). In this sense, takes into account the context associated with the social state and the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing us to adapt or modify sessions through the use of virtual platforms or asynchronous activities. Finally, in this stage the main objectives of academic and psychoeducational support were co-constructed together with the tutors: (1) Approve the critical assignments of the academic semester; (2) Enhance learning and emotional regulation resources among tutors; (3) Develop a studio team between and among participants in the tutorial space.

Phase 4: Implementation

It corresponds to the *implementation* of the tutorials, which are carried out between three moments: beginning, development and completion. At the beginning of each session, a dynamic call was held: How are we? with the purpose of facilitating a space for dialogue to be able to express emotions, feelings and experiences before the social state and the pandemic. For this, between 5 and 10 minutes were allocated so that each student, voluntarily, could comment about how they emotionally came to the tutoring session, which could be supported using songs, metaphors or words that represented each person's affective state. It is important that the tutor adopts an empathetic, warm and active listening attitude towards his/her tutees at this moment, with the aim of being able to offer and co-build a space for collaboration, validation and listening in relation to what sit, think and live in your university stage.

Later on, during the development of the session (which lasted from 70 to 80 minutes) were implemented, in the first place, theoretical tutorials (presentation of content on the specific theme of the work assignment, together with learning strategies), while in subsequent sessions, practical tutorials were developed (application of content covered through group dynamics, debates and games).

As an example, to address The theoretical tutorials contain presentations on topics such as psychological theories, cognitive processes and neuroanatomy of the human brain, supported by presentations in PowerPoint format. At the same time, leaflets, infographics and audiovisual capsules designed by the team of educational psychologists from the APRENDE ULS Program will be used, with the aim of facilitating study techniques and strategies (organization and effective use of time, emotional self-regulation and management of academic stress) that allow them to enhance the socio-emotional and autonomous learning processes of their tutors.

Subsequently, in practical tutorials group activities were developed such as the elaboration of mental maps on paper graphs, analysis of cases based on psychosocial phenomena, drawings on the structures of the brain and games such as the memory of psychological concepts. All these dynamics were developed based on theoretical tutorials, favoring the application of these

contents on the ground, stimulating the development of constructivist learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Finally, at the end of the session, between 5 and 10 minutes were allocated to share group and individual reflections about the learning, feelings and experiences evoked in the tutorial space. For example, in some sessions each student summarized in one word how subjectively their experience of today in tutoring had been, while in others they carried out quizzes or used metaphors to represent their emotional experience and/or the most significant learning they acquired in it session. Furthermore, this space for dialogue was used by the students themselves to carry out proposals for content and activities (specifically in closings prior to the evaluation of assignments), which allowed the tutor to adjust the tutorial planning in function to the emerging needs and demands expressed by their tutors. Finally, as previously mentioned at the beginning of the tutorials, it is important that during the beginning of the sessions the tutor adopts an active and empathetic listening attitude towards the opinions, suggestions and reflections of his or her tutees.

Phase 5: Evaluation

At this stage, *evaluations* of the tutorials developed were carried out. To do this, small surveys and discussion groups will be used with the tutors to gather their opinions and suggestions for continuous improvement in the tutorial space. Accordingly, at this stage constant communications were established with the professional team of the APRENDE ULS Program (in charge of the coordination and execution of academic and psychoeducational support), with the aim of expressing the results of the evaluations and recommendations given by them) tutees. At the same time, meetings were held with tutors from the Faculty of Humanities to establish support networks that allow optimizing learning strategies in the tutorial space.

Phase 6: Close the process

The last stage of this strategy corresponds to the *closing* of the tutorial process, which is based on valuing the experience lived throughout the academic semester within the tutorials. To do this, a closed session was held where each mentee could comment and express the learning, emotions, resources and skills developed by each mentee over these months of support. Some of the shared phrases were as follows: "the tutorials provided very important support to overcome the impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic" "an enriching experience that helped me grow as a student" and "we learned one from others and our perception of the study changed".

It is important to note that this tutorial strategy has been used in person in 2019 (in online classes located in the Library of the University of La Serena) and remotely in 2020 (through the use of the Zoom platform). During this period of two years, approximately 67 sessions were held

and some procedures were adopted, requested from the APRENDE ULS Program, to record the tutorials carried out weekly. To do this, recordings of sessions were carried out (with the prior consent of each student) and a box was used where the tutor recorded the activities carried out, topics covered and observations of the tutors who attended the tutoring.

FINAL COMMENTS

Entrance to higher education causes university students to face multiple challenges, which can influence their learning process and impact their psychological and mental health (Sandoval-Barrientos, Dorner-París, & Véliz-Burgos, 2017). In this context of social and health crisis, university tutorials emerge as collective spaces that allow tutors and mentees to co-construct the professional identity of the psychologist. In this sense, facilitating the exchange of experiences and coping resources essential for addressing complex moments during undergraduate, such as admission to university, adapting to new study habits and mental health problems (Scorsolini-Comin, 2020).

The tutorial strategy developed in this professional experience provides an action framework for tutors, educational psychologists and higher education professionals, which represents an important tool for use in university academic and psychoeducational support programs. This is because the strategy takes into consideration those affective, experiential and social elements involved in learning and human interaction in university life. According to Amaral (2007) affectivity has a direct impact on the student's academic motivation for learning. In this way, activities such as dialogue spaces allow sharing experiences and the affective world that exists between tutors and students, enriching their learning process and providing an active and protagonist role within tutorial spaces, especially during periods of academic interruption that influence his university education.

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