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Assessment in higher education: conceptions and transformations in professors that teach to teachers at a chilean university. The case of professional peer tutoring

Evaluación en educación superior: concepciones y transformaciones en docentes que forman profesores en una universidad chilena. El caso de las tutorías entre pares profesionales

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: to improve educational assessment, it is essential that teachers transform their understanding of what it is and what it is used for. Teacher training, especially professional peer-to-peer learning, has been revealed as an effective tool for achieving this change and, consequently, improving both teaching and assessment.
Method: in this context, this article focuses on professional peer tutoring conducted by five tutors for 19 academics from the Faculty of Education at a Chilean university. The aim of this research is to describe, using a qualitative approach and phenomenographic design, the main transformations in the ways of conceiving evaluation.
Results and conclusions: among the results, a change in conception stands out, ranging from the technical and instrumental to the reflective, formative, and constructively aligned.

Keywords: Educational Assessment; Higher Education; Professional Peer Tutoring.

RESUMEN

Introducción: para mejorar la evaluación educativa, es fundamental que el profesorado transforme sus ideas sobre qué es y para qué sirve. La formación docente, especialmente el aprendizaje entre profesionales, se ha revelado como una herramienta eficaz para lograr este cambio y, consecuentemente, mejorar tanto la enseñanza como las evaluaciones.
Método: en ese contexto, este artículo focaliza en las tutorías entre pares profesionales realizadas por 5 tutores a 19 académicos de la Facultad de Educación de una Universidad chilena. El objetivo de la indagación es describir, con un enfoque cualitativo y un diseño fenomenográfico, las principales transformaciones en los modos de concebir la evaluación.
Resultados y conclusiones: entre los resultados destaca un cambio en las concepciones que va desde lo técnico e instrumental hacia lo reflexivo, formativo y constructivamente alineado.

Palabras clave: Evaluación Educativa; Educación Superior; Tutorías Entre Pares Profesionales.

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental challenge in tertiary education is to implement assessment processes that are meaningful and appropriate to the diverse realities of the student body.[1] Despite this, evidence indicates that contrary to the widespread adoption of competency-based models, university assessment is still oriented towards memorization.[2] A key aspect of forms of assessment are conceptions, understood as ideological frameworks that integrate beliefs, meanings, experiences, and guidelines for action.

A key aspect of forms of assessment is conceptions, understood as ideological frameworks that integrate beliefs, meanings, experiences, and action guidelines.[3] In this sense, there is evidence that faculty conceptions inform practice, especially in assessment, where product and heteroclassification assumptions prevail.[4]

Complexity in assessment requires formative processes to transform or construct new conceptions of what assessment is and what it is for. To this extent, collaboration and learning among professionals are an effective tool for enriching teaching.[5] Despite this observation, the current situation shows that there is no structural development of instances of improvement among professionals who are fully committed to evaluation as a subject. Some proposals demonstrate that, despite the lack of systematization in this line of professional development, collaboration and tutoring around evaluative processes encourage reflection among colleagues and improve teaching by broadening methodological perspectives and creating new possibilities for teaching and evaluation.[6] Similarly, it has been demonstrated that tutorial guidance is crucial to the development of professional learning, and its practical implementation requires methodical execution and institutional support.[7]

To promote continuous improvement, a private university in Santiago, Chile, has developed a system of professional peer tutoring (hereafter referred to as TPP), focusing on contextualized reflection of teaching practices. Although 61 PPTs were implemented between 2023 and 2024 in various faculties, this article focuses on those carried out in the Faculty of Education, as the continuing education of those who prepare future teachers is even more relevant to guarantee the quality of academic processes.[8]

Consequently, this research aims to describe the main transformations in the way academics conceive evaluation as part of the TPPs. The work is justified as relevant for two reasons: theoretically, it will provide evidence on how tutorial work among professional peers is an effective tool, particularly when there is an institutional structure in place. Secondly, the work is relevant in its practical scope, as the findings will favor decision-making on how to improve academic processes within university education.

METHOD

Approach and design

The study employs a qualitative approach, aiming to identify and describe the experiences of a group of academics by highlighting their subjectivities. Consistent with the strategy, a phenomenographic design [9] is proposed to explore the participants' conceptions of evaluation as a specific social practice.

Participants

The study was conducted with 19 teachers from the Faculty of Education who participated in the TPPs between 2023 and 2024. Twelve of them are tutored academics, and five are program tutors.

Data collection technique

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data and explore variations in participants' experiences. The interviews were conducted online between December 2024 and January 2025, with an average duration of 45 minutes.

Data analysis

Axial and selective data reduction, mediated by the constant comparison method, allowed the identification of recurrent and relevant categories. In the communication of results, these categories will be reported using thematic analysis techniques,[10] i.e., they will be explained and interpreted as prevalent themes. In each thematization, live codes representative of all participants will be included. Whenever textualities are quoted, they will be identified with the acronym DT (tutored teachers) and a corresponding identification number (e.g., DT3 = tutored teacher number three). When a tutor is cited, it will be done with the acronym TA (Academic Tutor) plus an identifying number (e.g., TA1 = Academic Tutor number one).

Scientific rigor in the communication

The order of the communication is given in three moments: first, the TPP experience is described. Then, the initial conceptions are expressed, and thirdly, the final conceptions are presented. Regarding the scientific rigor aspects, the work has the informed consent of all participants and the instrumental validation of expert judges in three dimensions: consistency, sufficiency, and readability of the interview.

RESULTS

The professional peer tutoring experience

As will be seen synthetically in figure 1, PPTs are characterized by being dialogical, individual, reflective, and jointly elaborated instances. They have a minimum of three and a maximum of five sessions that are carried out online. Initially, a diagnostic exploration is conducted, followed by the development of a consensual plan that involves collaborative work, feedback, and reflection on the constructive process. The theoretical perspective of PPTs, on which peer tutors receive specific training, refers to evaluation as a learning practice that regulates didactic, methodological, and curricular aspects of instruction.[11] This training consists of asynchronous self-instructional courses and practical workshops.
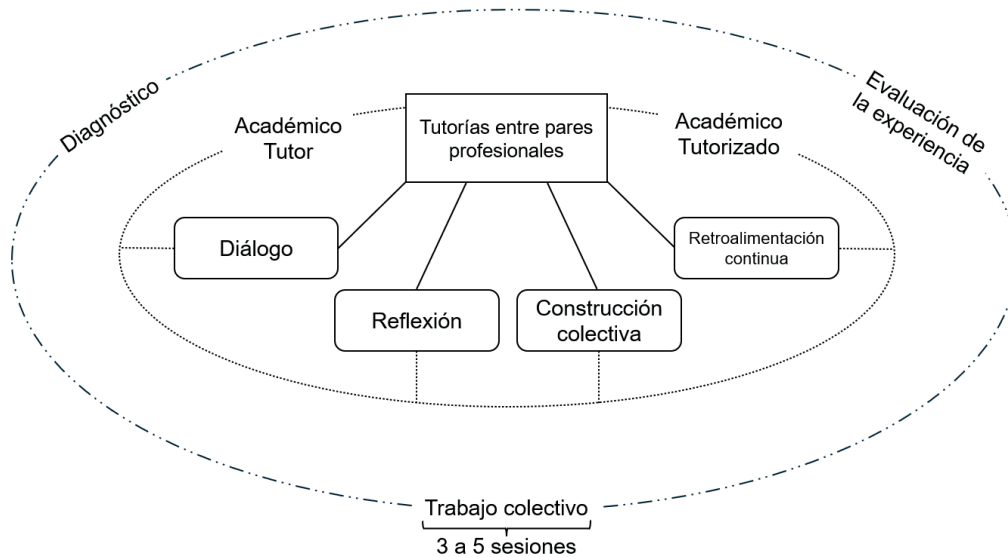

Figure 1. Professional peer mentoring process: general characteristics

Initial Conceptions of Evaluation

The grouping of codes led to a first category that we call 'assessment as an instrumental technique.' In this case, the conceptions with which the teachers began the PPTs referred to the technical need to improve or construct assessment instruments under the general conception that a correctly designed instrument, independent of the didactic processes, leads to improved final results. For example, DT2 states: 'I was waiting for an assessment on time for one of my evaluations.' In a similar vein, participants expressed the wish for tutoring to 'work on the final product' (WP12). They also expressed the need to 'refine a little more the issue of drawing up rubrics to work on the final grade' (WP5) and to 'fine-tune assessment instruments so that more information can be obtained when establishing the semester grades' (WP7).

This view of assessment as equivalent to a marking instrument differs from the conceptions expressed by the tutors, who distinguish a certain 'dissociation between the methodological strategies used and the assessment instruments' (TA2). Similarly, they identify a gap in the approach to assessment 'both in the construction of strategies and in the assessment instruments for comparing learning' (TA3).

As figure 2 shows, to transform conceptions and, consequently, assessment practices, the team of tutors focuses on specific theoretical orientations derived from the institutional formative line.
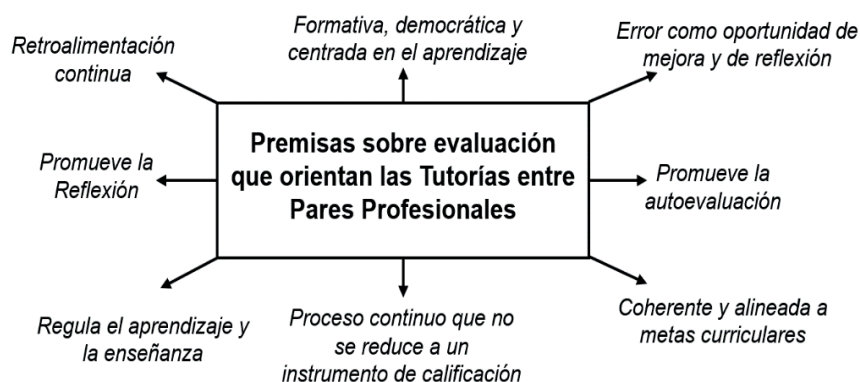

Figure 2. Premises on evaluation: the TPP approach

Based on the above premises and the reflective work of the PPTs, conceptions of evaluation shifted from the view of 'instrumental technique' to the idea of an 'aligned, formative and reflective process' (see figure 3). These changes will be developed further in the following section.
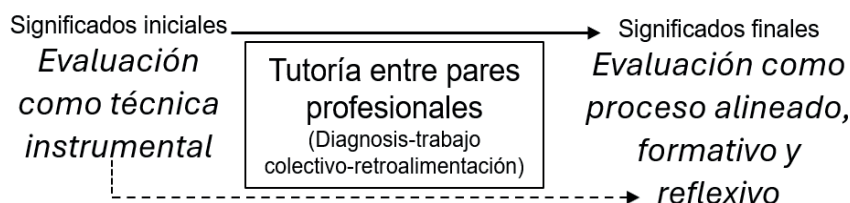

Figure 3. Changes in the conception of the evaluation process

Re-signifying evaluation: transformed conceptions

A second grouping of codes led to a category we called 'evaluation as an aligned, formative, and reflective process.' A key aspect that the PPTs emphasized was the value of feedback and collective work as integral components of assessment processes. DT10 points out:

My tutor provided me with a lot of feedback; she told me that I was very creative and highlighted my strengths in teaching. And she also told me that my idea of using authentic material was excellent (...) I also appreciated the fact that she provided me with very positive feedback, allowing us to move forward together.

This relationship system, which favored a change in conceptions, is endorsed by the academic tutors. TA5 states:

First, we had a long dialogue about the need to make adjustments. First, we reviewed the curricular activity and attempted to examine the instrument that our colleagues had previously designed. We evaluated the instrument's effectiveness by verifying whether it aligned with the learning outcomes and indicators. We discussed the findings and reached a consensus.

These reflections made it possible to transform the idea that only well-made instruments lead to good evaluations. The key concept is that for a good evaluation process, it is necessary to generate more instances of formative feedback. Likewise, the concept of evaluation as a resource aligned with didactic practices and curricular discourses has emerged:

Every time we met with the tutor, we reviewed the internal coherence that the indicator had with the instructional slogan and the type of instrument(...)It was a dialogical question where she asked me: how does the student perform to achieve this? What should you exemplify in the classes for them to achieve it? How do the activities align with the program's indicators? (DT3).

Paradoxical for the previous argument is the account of DT8:

'Sometimes it is sub-understood that if the indicator says such and such, the student must know that this is what I am studying, but in instruction, it is not always seen as coherent (...) that coherence began to show me and there I began to learn another dimension of assessment that I did not have on the radar.

The conception that an assessment aligned with the didactic-curricular modifies the instructional processes is endorsed in the quote from DT2: 'The need was to make an instrument, but for me now that has a direct correlation with the way the course is structured... inevitably the assessment and the evaluative mechanism modify everything else'.

Finally, the conceptions expressed after the PPT process show the premise of assessment as more reflective than technical practice: 'It is important to reflect on why a checklist, for example, could be more relevant for this first instance, that is, to understand also why I use guidelines or rubrics and at what point they may be more appropriate' (DT9). In a similar vein, DT7 states that 'assessment goes beyond just getting a result or achievement level information... It is also modeling a process. Along the same lines, DT5 reflected on the importance of the instruments being transparent and of allowing them to regulate how learning takes place rather than measuring the results of an instructional process: 'Yes, above all, I reflect on the issue of giving them the rubric beforehand, so that they can also read it and apart from that understand what they have to do.'

DISCUSSION

The results suggest a modification in the conceptions of educational assessment as a result of the PPTs. Specifically, the initial conception of assessment as a technical and instrumental instance changed to the conception of assessment as an aligned and reflective process. This transformation can be explained by the qualities of the PPT device, specifically its collaborative and feedback-driven dynamic, as well as its

interactional, individualized, and reflective nature. The findings regarding the qualities of the PPT device as an explanatory dimension of the change in conception are similar to the conclusions of other studies [12,13] that show that teacher mentoring is effective when, among other variables, it has institutional support, develops concrete products, makes a collaborative relationship explicit and is based on evaluation for continuous improvement.

Regarding the initial conceptions, the idea that evaluation is a technical and instrumental process aligns with research [14,15] that indicates the existence of teachers' beliefs about evaluation as a technique for grading products without emphasizing its formative and regulatory functions. The interpretation of the result enables us to assert that these conceptions are related to the assumption that learning and assessment serve as reproductive and informative devices, allowing us to define, measure, and assess specific ways of understanding and particular expressions of knowledge.

On the other hand, the final conceptions associated with assessment as a formative, aligned, and reflective process align with other reports [16, 17] that support the idea that the evaluation should favor complex and comprehensive learning processes through the planning of coherent, self-critical instances based on continuous feedback.

When interpreting these findings in general, it is crucial to note that the expressions in question are situated at the level of teachers' conceptions, i.e., at the level of the ideological frameworks that inform ways of doing, saying, and feeling about educational assessment. It is to be expected, based on this interpretation, that the evaluation processes conducted by this group of teachers are more reflective, formative, and coherent than they were before the tutorial process beginning.

CONCLUSIONS

Having identified the predominant conceptions about the evaluation of a group of teachers who were accompanied by a system of professional peer tutoring, it is possible to describe the main transformations as a change of perspective from the technical and instrumental to the reflective, formative, and constructively aligned.

This conclusion should be read in the context of the study's limitations, specifically the consideration of the perspectives of the mentee and tutors without contrasting them with the perspectives of the students and their qualifications. As a projection, it is suggested to explore the phenomenon from the student's perspective and examine their learning outcomes to determine measurable incidences and impacts within the learning process.

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FINANCING

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
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