



Group Dynamics and the Role of the Tutor

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Participating in an InterAct-type simulation offers the adult learner the opportunity to practice first hand a wide array of interaction patterns serving learning aims referring to teamwork, ICT, communication and languages. An overall assessment of the dynamics as experienced and expressed by the participants in the mail conferences of the InterAct pilot rounds reveals highly positive reactions and benefits.

Basically, the model brings together people with a common goal in two types of groups: face-to-face groups and virtual groups. In the four InterAct pilot rounds, the people in the face-to-face national groups generally knew each other and had already been working for the same organization, while the virtual international group was a first for all the participants. The Romanian national groups were an exception to this rule – in each round, a guest institution was invited to send participants who could also benefit from the model. This meant that new acquaintances were made also locally, with one effect worth underlining: the young tourist agency Edrocast invited and met four students, members of the local mountaineering club Turistor whom Edrocast later on employed in further developing real educational and green tourism packages based on their positive and energetic contribution during the simulations. This experience makes the applicability of the InterAct model in employment candidate selection worth exploring.

Back to the model tested four times, a key feature emerged in that each group was accompanied by a tutor who did not play the traditional teacher role but tried to facilitate national and international teamwork, collaborative learning and the creative process. However, facilitation did not imply less involvement. Quite on the contrary – the role of the tutor in such an educational model seems only to be increasing in a geometric proportion with the complexity of the interaction patterns during the various stages and tasks.

In order to analyze the group dynamics and role of the tutor more closely, a quick summary of the piloted rounds is necessary. Below are some relevant coordinates common to each round:

- groups of 3-8 participants from UK, Norway, Spain and Romania (2 groups) functioning as 5 national groups and as one international group
- participants with little to no experience in one or several New Basic Skills and international collaboration
- common fields of interest and scenario themes
- script with tasks covering one day/week for 5 weeks
- wide variety of collaborative tasks, some for the international group: interview, research, production, presentation, negotiation, evaluation, reflection etc.
- work and communication uploaded and visible on the online platform shared by all, including tutors

First of all, a simple quantitative analysis of the mail conferences reveals that the model generally leads to the writing of 400-500 messages in approx. 30 contact hours. Figures 1 and 2 show how these messages were distributed, illustrating the involvement of tutors and national groups at international level.

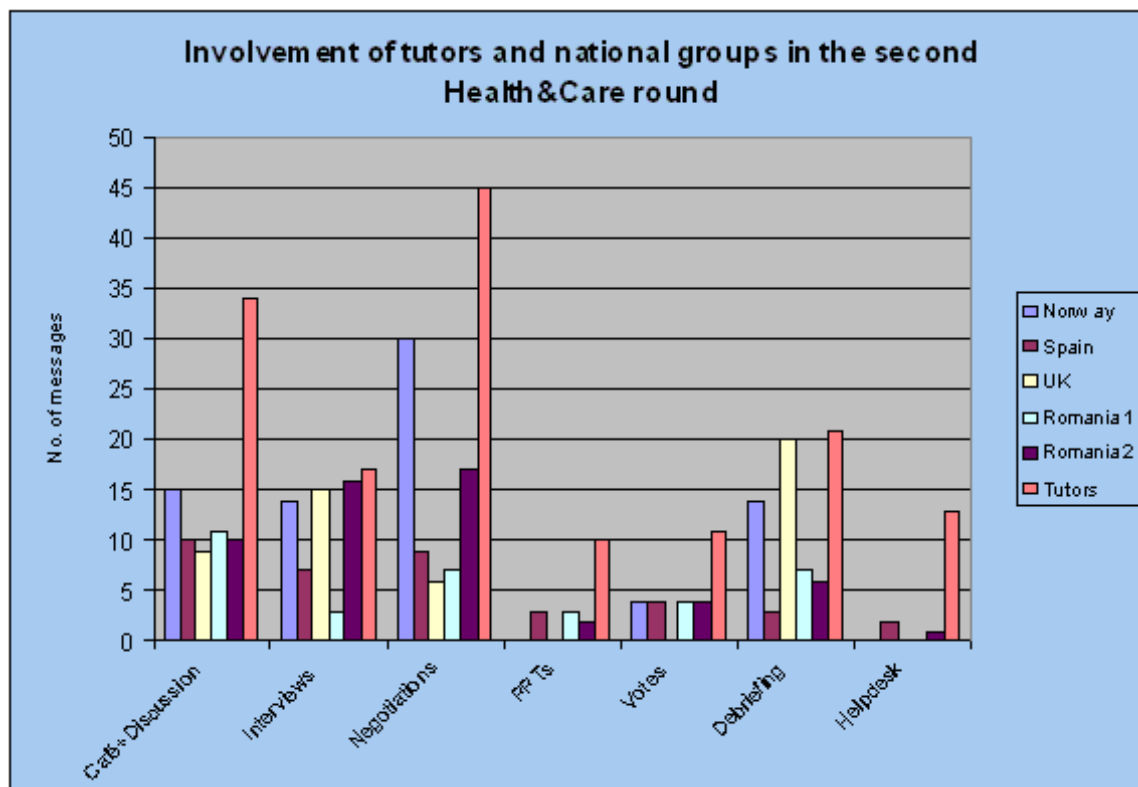


Figure 1.

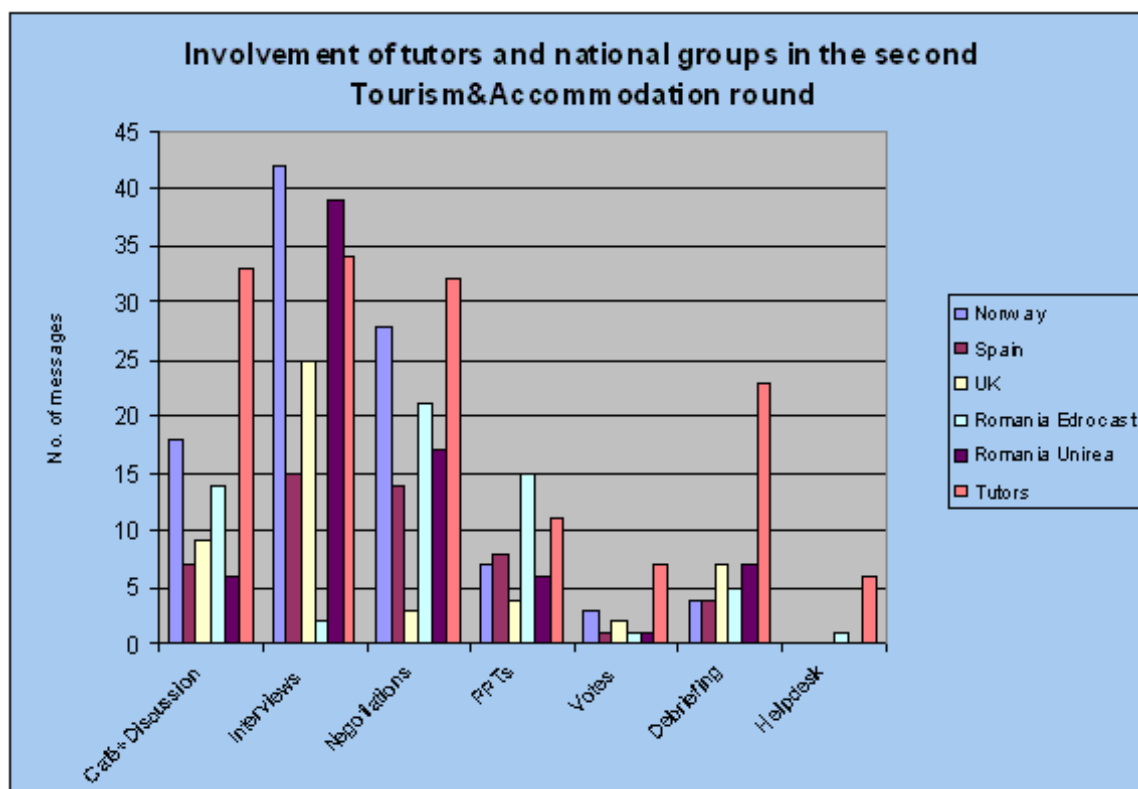


Figure 2.

A quick look at the charts above cannot hide quite a high level of participation from the part of the tutors. Figures 3 and 4 further illustrate this aspect.

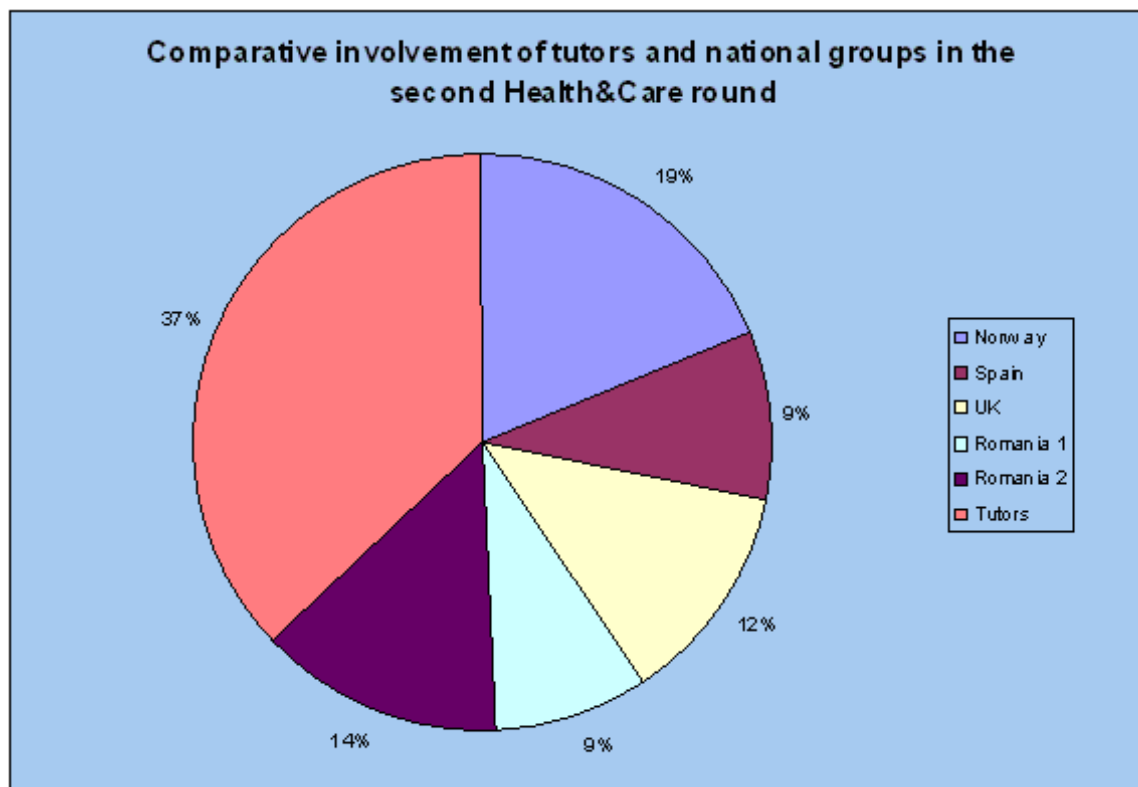


Figure 3.

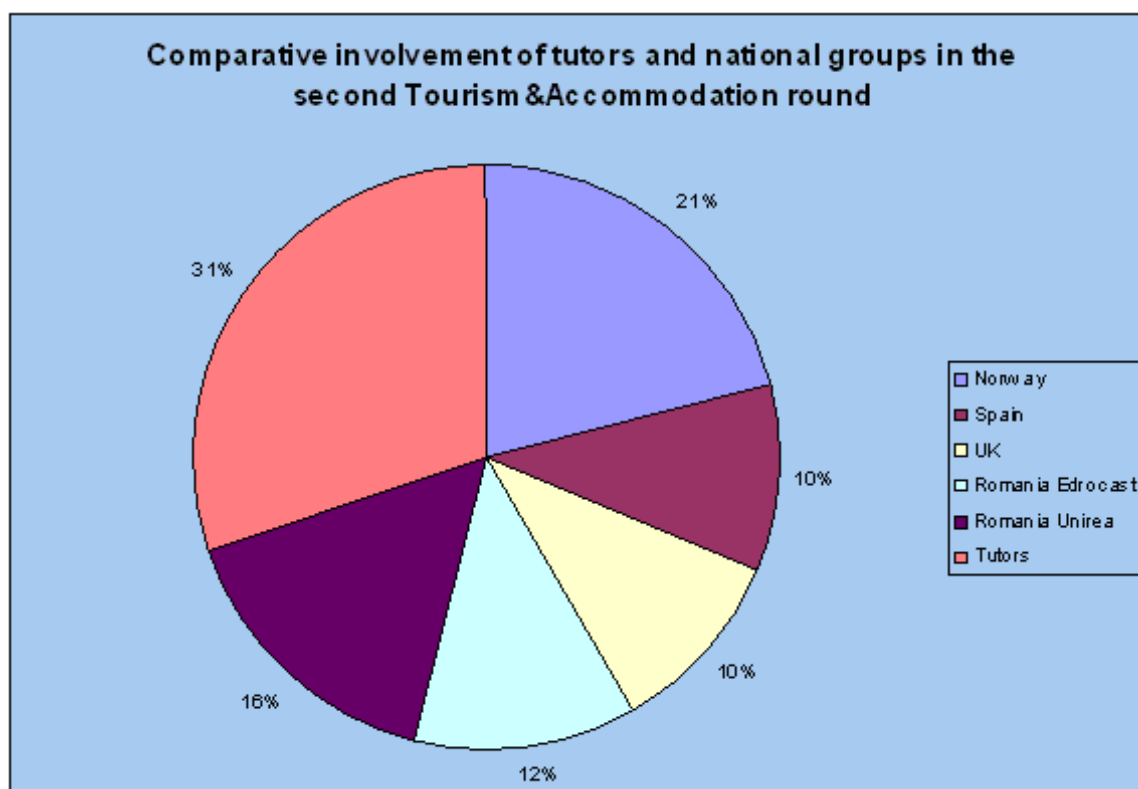


Figure 4.

Reasonably enough, one may wonder whether the tutors were perhaps too active, but the relative consistency between the two completely separate rounds may indicate otherwise. However, these numbers are just to give an idea of how all national groups were present and active on the online platform in the international communicative tasks. This represented a crucial ingredient in the dynamics of the groups, as the international collaboration was one of the biggest motivators for all the participants.

But how exactly did the individual participants interact with each other? A closer look at the messages and into the memory of the simulation rounds is necessary, and two directions are logically identified: interaction in the face-to-face national groups and interaction between individuals and groups at international level. Before leaving the mail conferences on the online platform, let's first look into the international component of the

interaction.

A number of communication functions emerged as a result of analyzing and comparing the messages on the online platform. They are presented below (including tutor interventions), followed by a few examples for better understanding.

Type	Functions of messages
Social-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greet - Express feelings and emotions - Exchange information and opinions outside the tasks - Complement, congratulate, encourage
Task-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide information - Provide opinion - Launch idea or suggestion - Ask for information and/or clarification - Comment or interpret - Show understanding - Explain, motivate - Correct - Express agreement - Express disagreement - Suggest compromise - Make a decision - Reflect - (Self)evaluate - Vote
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Announce upload of materials - Acknowledge receipt of message/materials - Mediate - Provoke participation - Manage time - Report on national status - Summarize - Provide help and support - Coordinate teamwork

Table 1. Functions performed and practiced by participants in the mail conferences.

Examples:

- Greet

Hi!We're the Spanish group.We 're four girls and our names are: Conchi, Berta ,Iranzu and Virginia.We want to say you hello and we hope to have a good time with all of you.;)

- Express feelings and emotions

YEEEEEEEEES! We are so plased!

- Exchange information and opinions outside the tasks

My name is Clement. I work for the St. Thomas Hospital in London. I am employed as Housekeeping assistant. I am particularly interested in the way the Norwegians assembled their points, because you people all work in the hospital sector. You are all medical staff. Do you enjoy your daily work-life? How much money do you earn monthly? How do you get to work, by bus, train or bicycle?

- Comment or interpret

Hi Frode

it was very interesting to see that the Norwegian team concentrated on very big political issues such as healthcare systems, pollution, the media, employment etc rather than the little things such as eat

fish or drink less.

Is this because you are all already very healthy people up in Norway?

Dave UK

Explain, motivate

We decided to eliminated the ES3 mith " Diet products are fat free" their explication isn't fully corect. Sugar and salt isn't fat and real fat is in less quantity

Express agreement

Dear Spanish group,

we agree with most of your suggestions. We will include RO2_2 in the combination of UK2 + RO1_1, but instead of eliminating both NO5 and RO1_4 we would like to combine them. Life in the country/mountains is spared from pollution, it is true, but it is also very difficult and it is not a statistical reality that people there live longer. So we still consider it a myth. If you agree, we are then down to 18 myths at the moment.

Express disagreement

The NO team does not agree.

I has not been proven scientifically that a good laugter prolongs life, as we have said in previous mails. regards NO

- Correct

Sorry wrong Country again i should send this to Spain :-)

- Report on national status

The romanian team is ready to start the work. We just read the instructions, and we think that this day will be very interesting.

We already think witch team did the best work. Soon we'll start to give marks. We hope that you'll have a nice day.

Regards Ro2 team

Reflect

We are satisfied because we finished well our work. we had a good day writting in english and we're more relaxed than the first time.

Untill next time,

Bye,bye

Vote

7 points

Norway presentation for originality, good choice of character, funny and a consistent look of the slides.

5 points

Romanian1 presentation for a good choice of subject and pictures.

2 points

Spain Powerpoint for the picture with cestnuts doctor woman.

Often, the reply to a request came quickly and satisfactorily, generating a positive feeling of efficient collaboration on both sides. Whenever a delay occurred in the exchange of information and materials relevant to the tasks, the recipient group would first express concerns or frustration internally, speculating on possible causes, then update the request and try to make contact with the other group. The tutors had an essential part to play here, as they would remind the waiting group that acquiring New Basic Skills was the aim of the game, often a time-consuming process for all involved. At the sender group's end, the tutor would, if necessary, take over the more challenging aspects of the task and simply demonstrate to participants how it is done, before giving them the opportunity to practice with more confidence. Such was the case of a large UK group in the final round, where the participants had practically no ICT skills whatsoever, their tutor having to deal with the fundamentals of using a computer before dealing with the tasks. A steep learning curve for the participants.

The above situation brings us back to the noticeably high level of tutor involvement in the international interaction. In many models employing work and communication from a distance on an online platform, it has already been proven that learner participation is boosted by a visible and constant involvement of the teachers, responsible for keeping communication alive. In addition, it is very relevant to the InterAct model that the participants had little to no New Basic Skills to begin with, thus requiring a lot of assistance and support in performing the tasks successfully. From this perspective, the level of tutor participation and

visibility online is not only explained, but also justified and recommended.

Therefore, to help the potential tutor further, some reasons for possible international communication breakdown (transferable to face-to-face contexts as well) are:

- the sender fails to convey the intended message, frequently a language problem in fact
- the receiver doesn't (fully) understand the intended message, also possibly due to limited linguistic competencies
- the sender and receiver do not relate to the same situation in the same way – due to the differences in the personal, social and cultural background
- the sender and receiver are not used to online communication, especially when written
- the personality factor – issues regarding patience, tolerance etc.

To conclude on the international group dynamics, the provided list of mail functions may serve well in identifying and designing learning aims and tasks for future groups, including aims referring to language skills through modern communicative methods. The tutor plays an essential role in providing the participants with support, illustration and organization, keeping a high profile focused on friendly, engaging and positive messages to the groups. On the other hand, the tutors must be aware at all times when to intervene and when to allow for participant initiative. The best interaction pattern seems to combine all the mentioned functions in a balanced way, therefore the tutor should pay attention and compensate for missing pieces as long as this doesn't cancel learning, but rather stages it and makes it more accessible to the participants.

Shifting attention to the interaction within the face-to-face groups, a first obvious difference from the online interaction is that one cannot hide behind the computer screen but must react on the spot to the actions of the others in the group. Since the InterAct model implies frequent international collaboration, time availability to solve any given task is limited and therefore the tutors are highly recommended to acquire some basic knowledge on group dynamics prior to the simulation activities. This would help shed light quickly on who in the group may develop into the authoritarian, the democratic or the laissez-faire etc.

The InterAct experience in this respect reveals that every individual participant, while assuming some type of role, took in fact turns in contributing to the group dynamics in a variety of ways. Similarly, the participants took turns in triggering learning for one another, and while they were a group performing a task together, each individual learned something different, fitting personal needs and objectives.

To illustrate the variety of the roles participants shared during their collaborative meetings, a classification similar to the one before may be performed (Table 2.):

Type	Roles
Social oriented	Team-builder Stimulator Mediator
Task oriented	Idea launcher Coordinator Informer (especially in the two Romanian groups working in the same room) Researcher Expert Secretary Producer Critic Editor
Individual personality factors	Dominator Dependent Attention seeker Story-teller

Table 2.

To add to the above, the participants's position in the group was not necessarily fixed either. In central positions, participants oriented their colleagues, suggesting solutions, making proposals, summarizing, explaining, evaluating etc. Contributors then presented personal opinions and comments, expressed (dis)

agreement, asked relevant questions etc. At the receiver's end participants were passive or active observers, showing attention or asking for clarification. The occasional satellites introduced elements unrelated to the topic/discussion but not necessarily disruptive, e.g. reactions to the most recent football match etc.

Throughout the simulation activities in each round, all tasks were solved through discussion and collaboration, sharing the workload flexibly between the group participants. The overall energy in any given national group and pilot round fluctuated around three levels, usually transpiring to the other national groups through the mail conferences:

- high: intensity and euphoria
- average: efficiency, harmony, solidarity
- low: apathy, confusion, reserve, defense

Equally challenging and advantageous, the discussions and collaboration as results from the piloting of the InterAct model gave all the participants:

- opportunities to contribute
- high levels of human interaction and involvement
- overall efficient communication
- reciprocal support and guidance, along with shared use of resources
- focus on the creative process
- sense of personal ownership over the developed products
- friendly atmosphere
- high level of motivation and commitment towards lifelong learning
- increased confidence and reduced fear of failure

In light of the above, it is evident that the tutor may greatly enhance the benefits of the activities or, on the contrary, fail to capitalize on the interaction potential. A number of suggestions may conclude this chapter and better prepare those interested in setting up InterAct-like interaction models, especially where learning aims revolve around communication skills.

- to ensure successful group work, try to strike a balance between:
 - consultation of members – gather their knowledge, experience, opinions, suggestions; understand and accept
 - various points of view, identify similarities and differences that may help you along the way
 - helping decision-making – making sure there is a positive climate of agreement
 - troubleshooting – providing support when needed, being helpful “here and now”
 - not getting involved at times, letting the participants discover group work and interaction patterns by themselves
- don't forget to give everyone the opportunity to take part, even if this means social talk as well, value individual acts and contributions, create a climate of friendship, empathy and mutual respect
- be ready to play the mediator in differences of opinions – expect them, don't avoid them, as they may send the group towards new solutions
- last but not least, enjoy yourself and be enthusiastic, as it has been proven to be highly and positively contagious.