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L'e-tutor a l'era del web 2.0

Conference planning

1. Tutoring online: a brief history
2. The e-Tutor: standards and evolution
3. Toward a “next generation”
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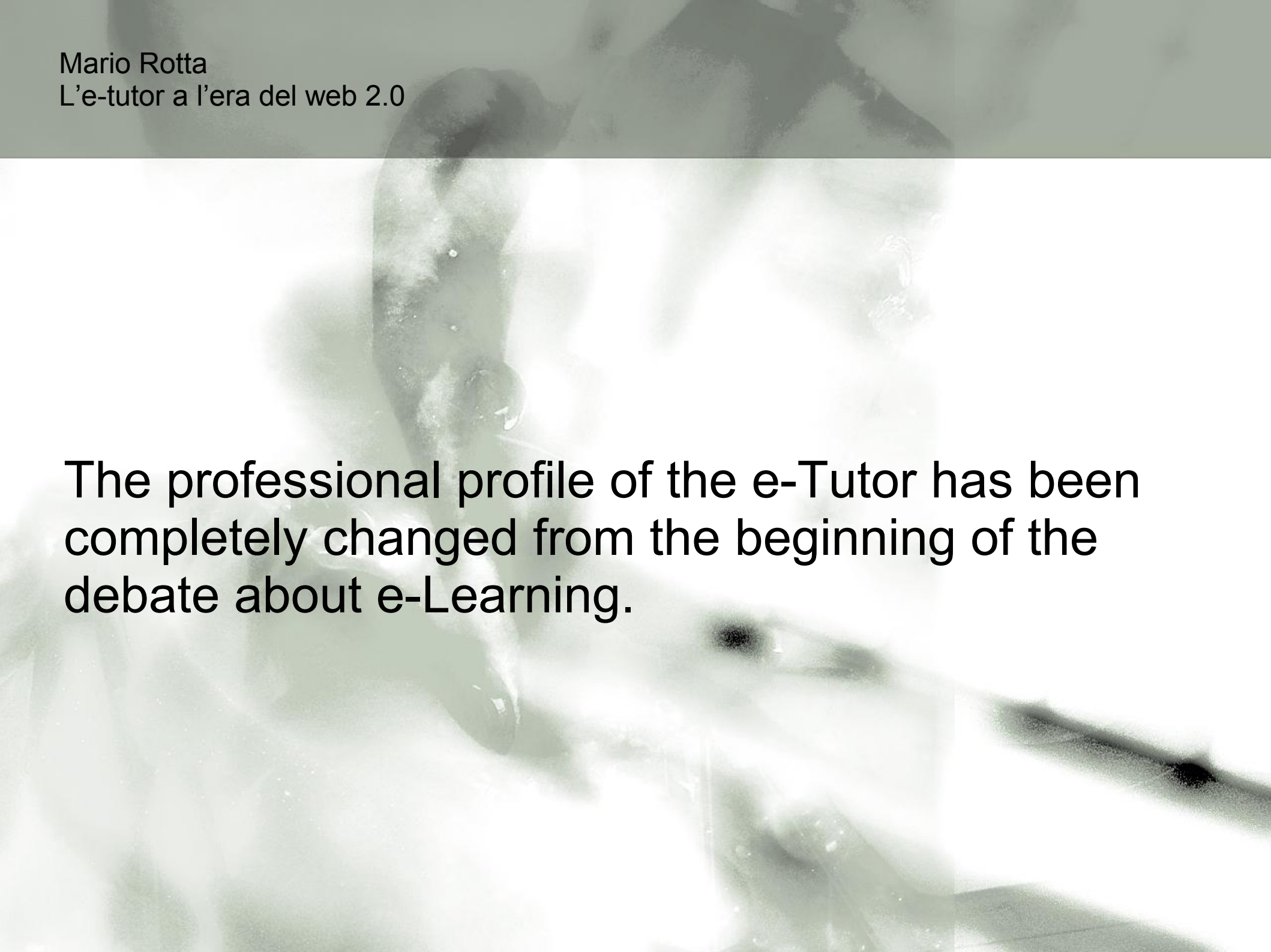
1. Tutoring online: a brief history



The professional profile of the e-Tutor has been completely changed from the beginning of the debate about e-Learning.

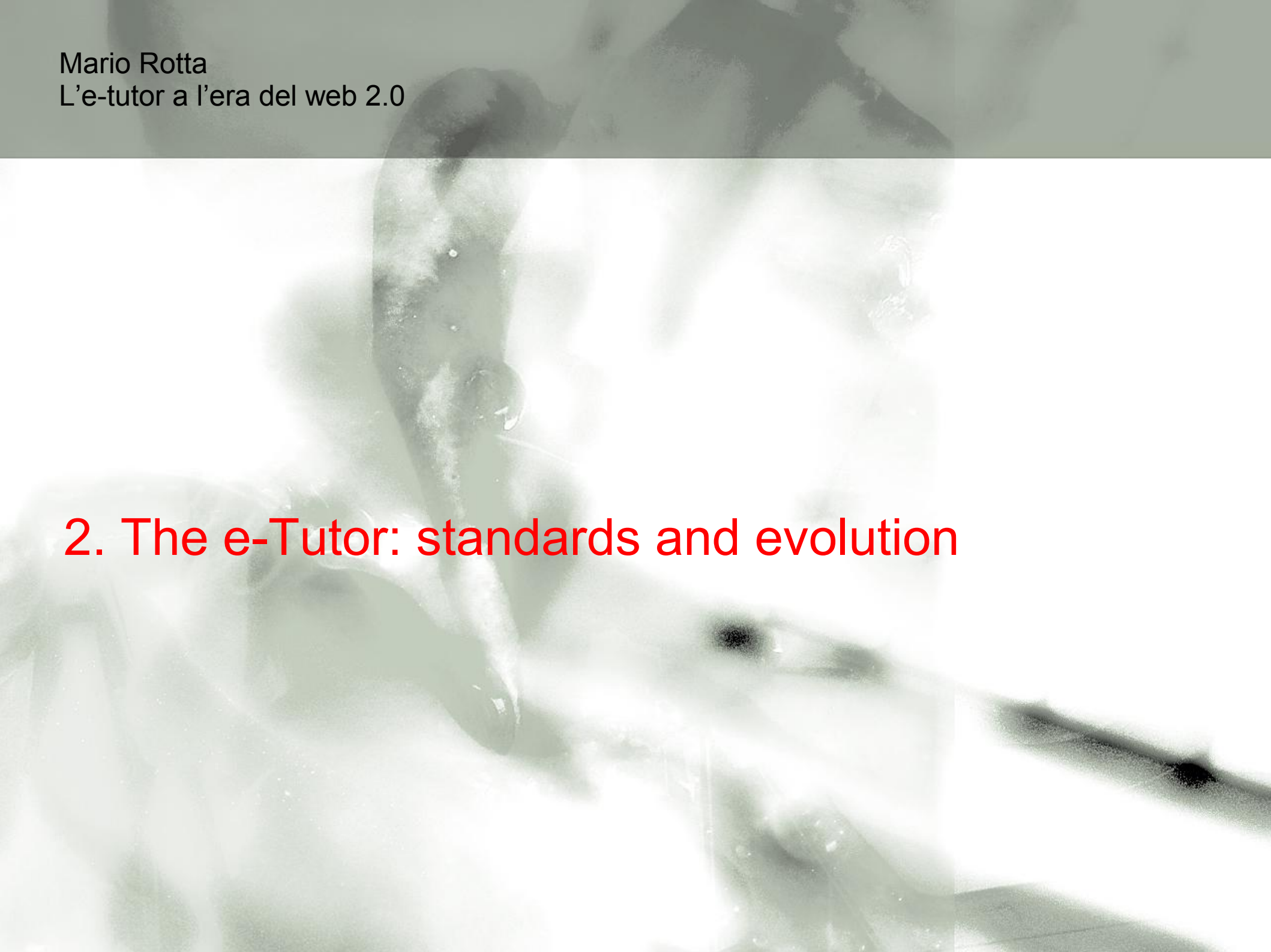
In the period 1993-1997, according to fundamental contributes by authors as Mason (1992), Berge & Collins (1995) or Rowntree (1995), the “e-moderator” has been described as an expert on mediated communication by e-mails, forums or chat.

Between 1997 and 2000, the research (Calvani & Rotta, 2000; Cornelius & Higgison, 2000; Collison & al., 2000; Salmon, 2000) focused on more complex frameworks to define the e-Learning. So, the "Tutor Online" has been involved in a lot of other tasks, such facilitating learners in time management or content understanding, motivating students, supporting technical problems, organizing the virtual learning environment.

The main framework, according to scenarios reinforced by Rowntree (1995) and revisited in Italy by Trentin (1999), Calvani and Rotta (2000), identified three "*levels*" of e-Tutoring, matching main goals of different learning processes and the more referred models of online courses:

- The Instructor
- The Facilitator
- The Moderator

But these scenarios are changing again in last 4-5 years. The emerging of learning strategies based on informal or social approach (use of blogs and wikis in education; social tagging to share knowledge; social networking to improve skills) emphasized the need of a more articulated description of the role of the “e-Tutor”.



2. The e-Tutor: standards and evolution

At now, almost in European vision, the research (Denis & al., 2003; Rotta & Ranieri, 2005) describes the e-Tutor as an expert skilled in a wide set of “*functions*” he could spend in supporting or managing online courses, according to the peculiarity of the context and the complexity of instances of the more and more dynamic instructional strategies set in e-Learning projects.

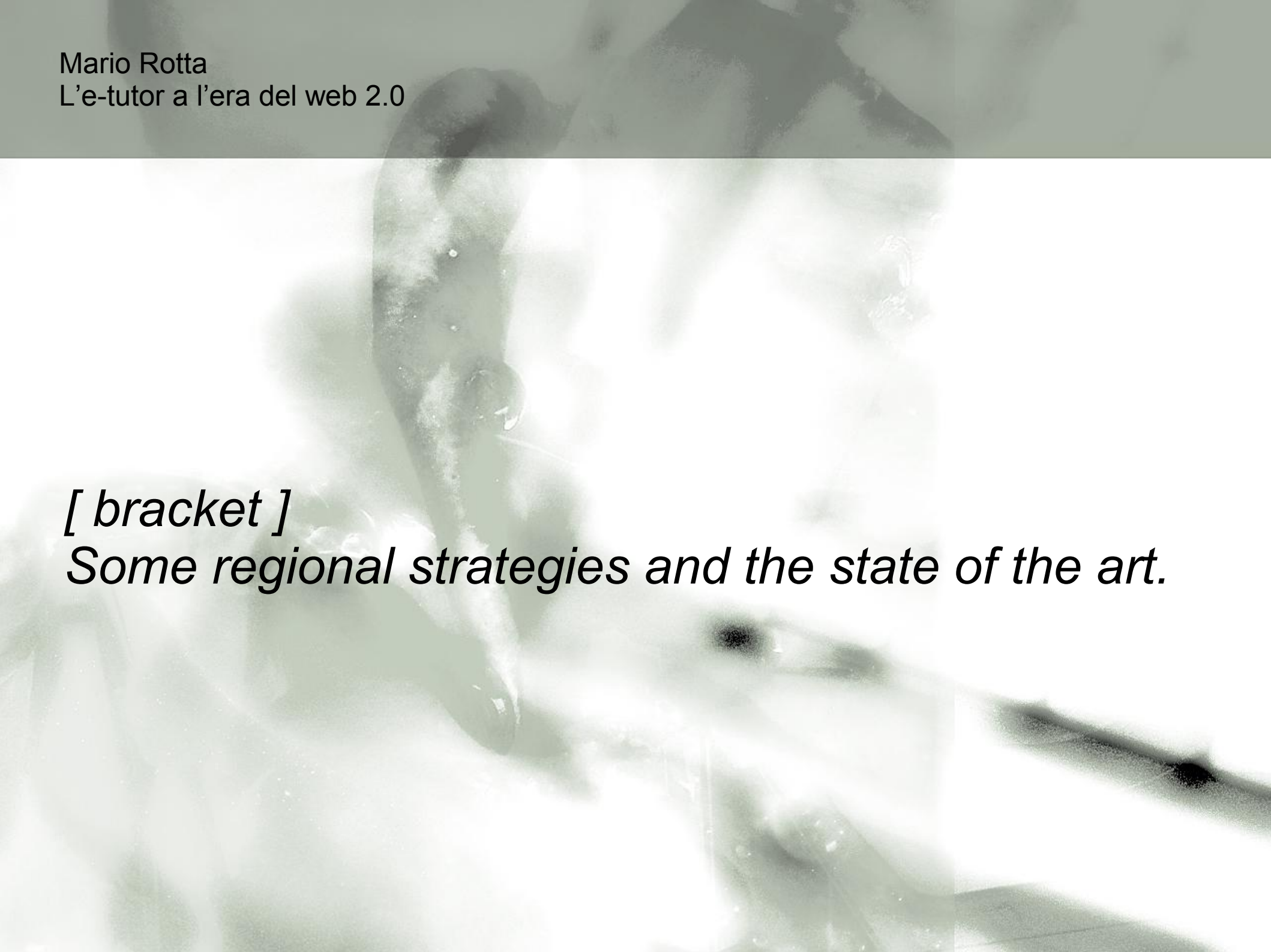
The original model by Denis identifies 11 main functions to set up an "ideal" e-Tutor:

1. The Content Facilitator
2. The Metacognition Facilitator
3. The Process Facilitator
4. The Advisor or Counsellor
5. The Assessor
6. The Technologist
7. The Resource Provider
8. The Manager or Administrator
9. The Designer
10. The Co-learner
11. The Researcher

Despite of the accurate articulation, it appears clearly that no e-Tutor (even a professional one with a lot of experience) can be skilled on all the functions identified in the Denis framework: the myth of the "complete" e-Tutor, according to Gardner (2000), does not match with the rising complexity of e-Learning solutions in Web 2.0 scenarios and beyond.

Anyway, the same functional framework seems to be uncompleted and it cannot give a real answer to new instances coming from the field, as the growing up of informal approach to learning processes or the social networking as a way to improve the sharing of knowledge in complex organizations. We need more “functions”...

The problem has a double consistency: by a side, it involves the research of a more accurate way to put in evidence all competencies, skills and capabilities really needed by an e-Tutor 2.0; by the other side, it is strictly referred to the strategies that, both in regional as in a European perspective, are still building standards in certification or training programs of the e-Tutors, to consolidate his key-role in the e-Learning.



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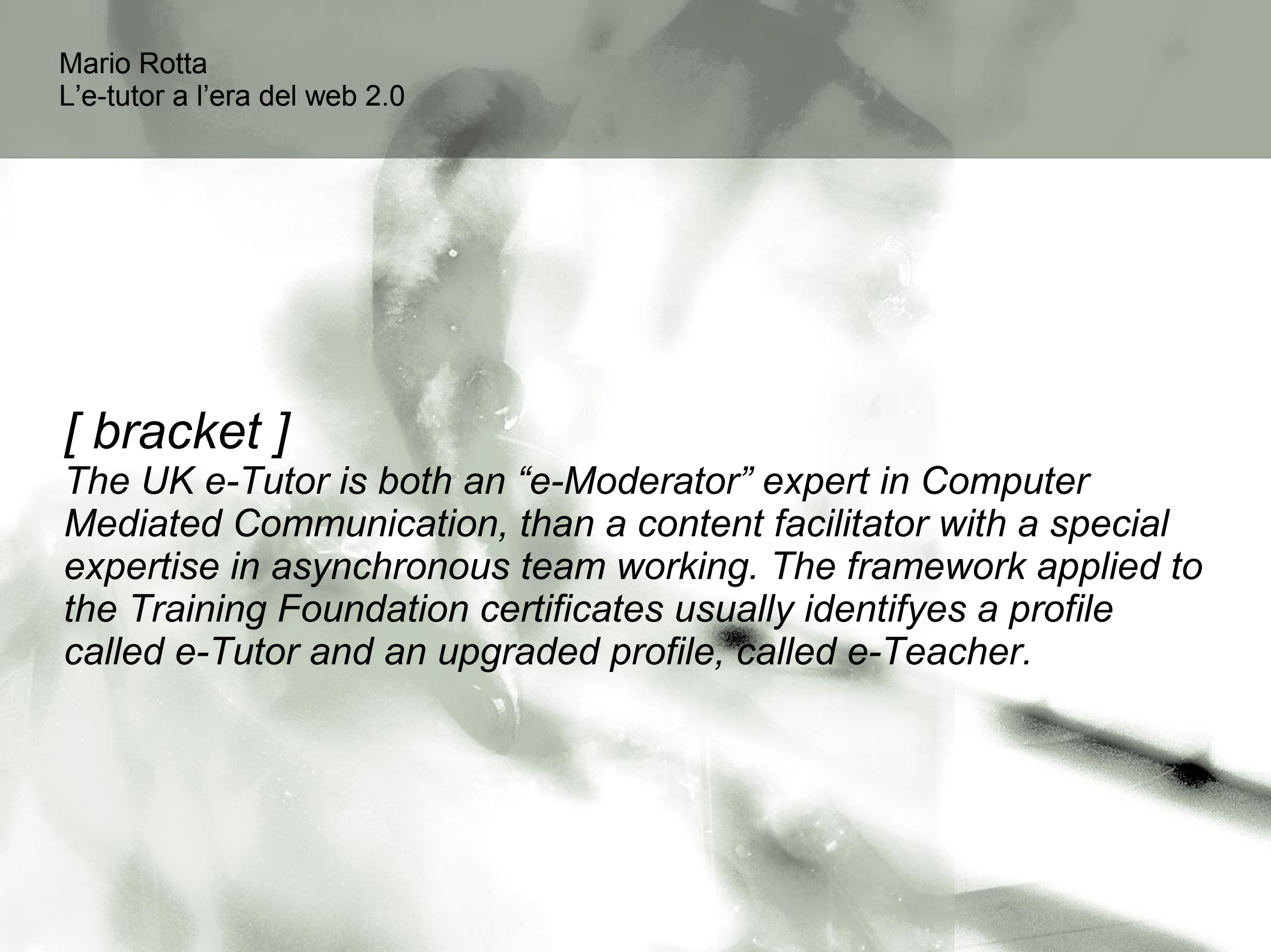
Some regional strategies and the state of the art.



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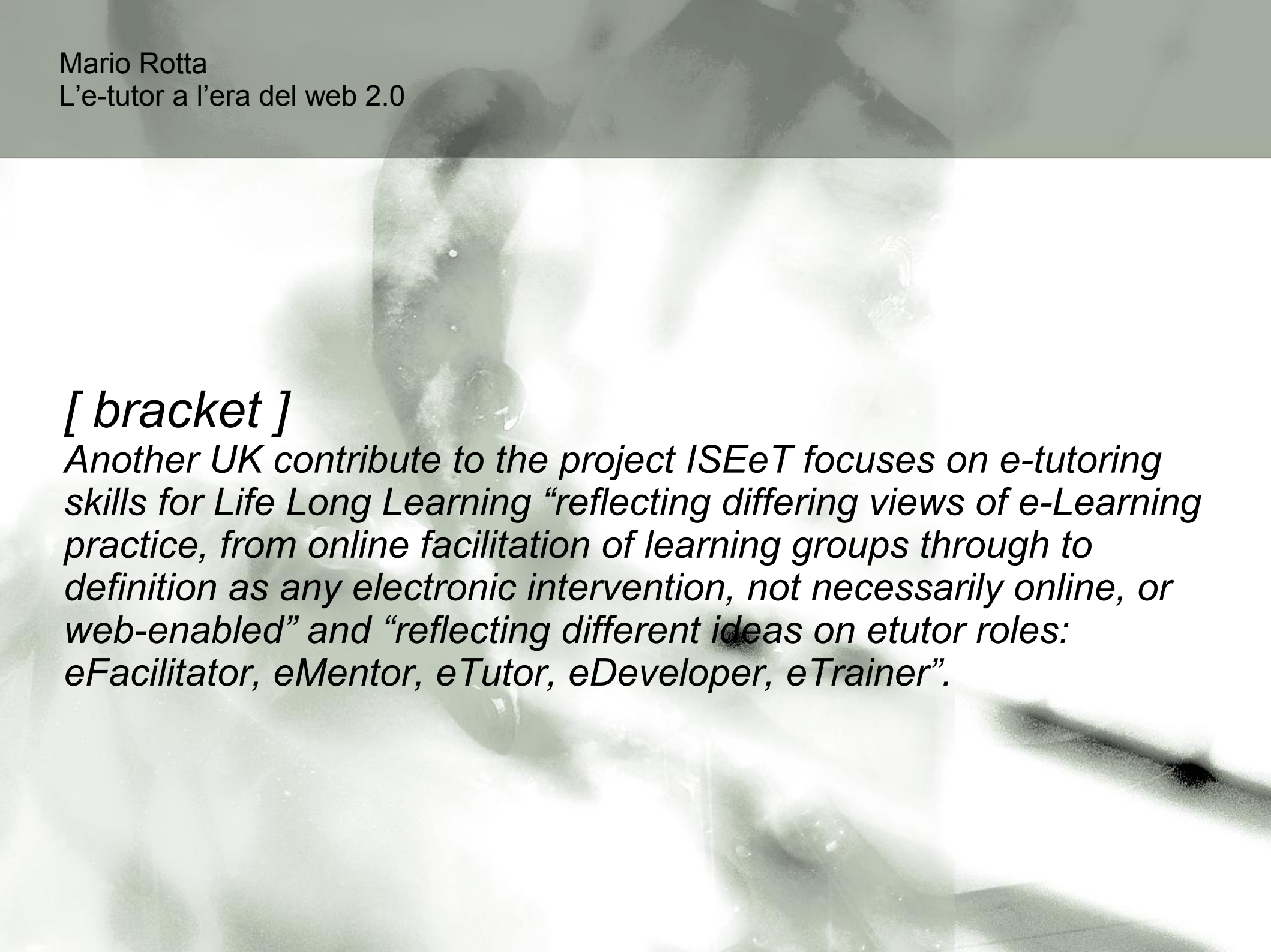
The UK e-Tutor is both an “e-Moderator” expert in Computer Mediated Communication, than a content facilitator with a special expertise in asynchronous team working. The framework applied to the Training Foundation certificates usually identifyes a profile called e-Tutor and an upgraded profile, called e-Teacher.



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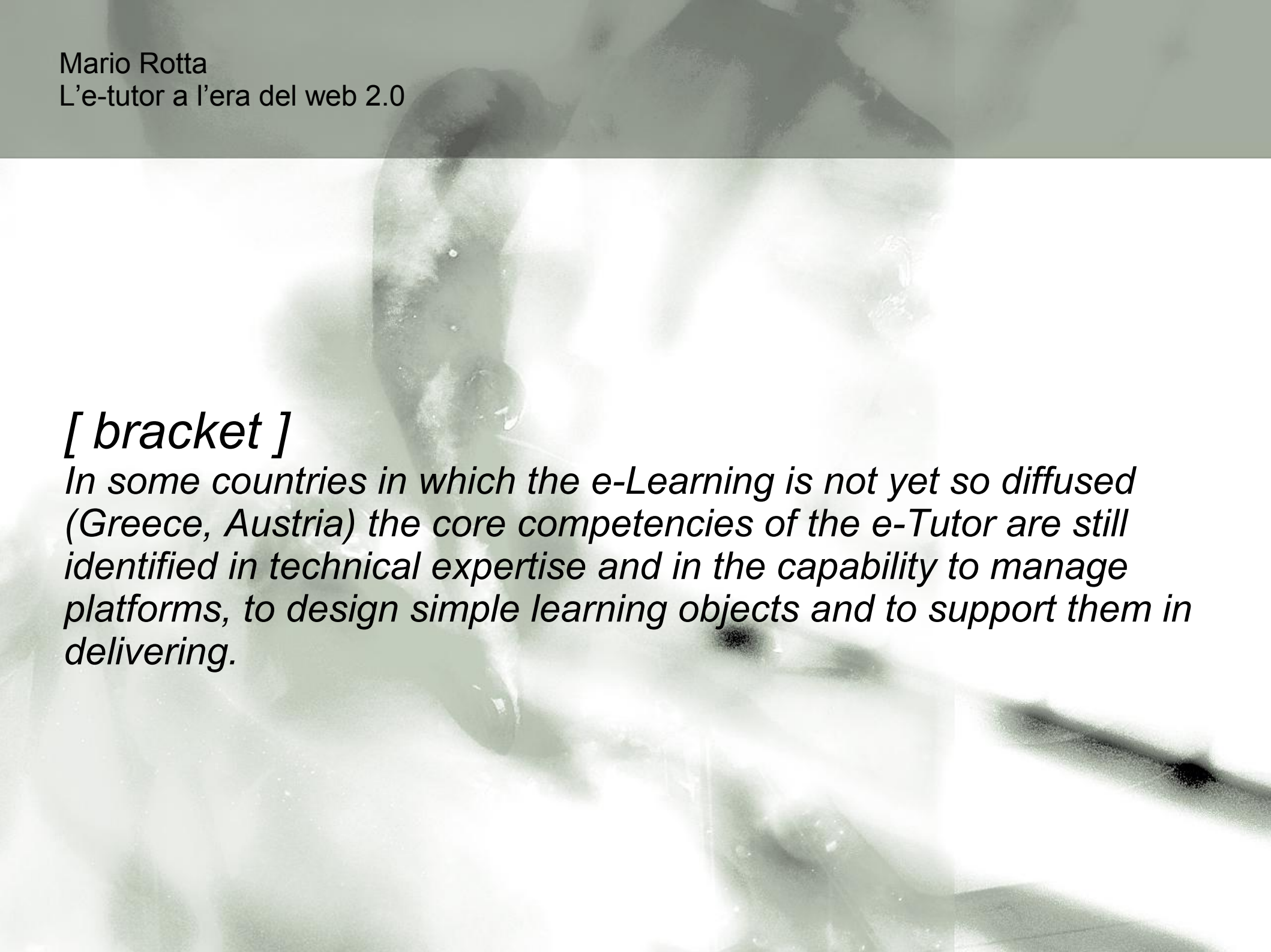
Another UK contribute to the project ISEeT focuses on e-tutoring skills for Life Long Learning “reflecting differing views of e-Learning practice, from online facilitation of learning groups through to definition as any electronic intervention, not necessarily online, or web-enabled” and “reflecting different ideas on etutor roles: eFacilitator, eMentor, eTutor, eDeveloper, eTrainer”.



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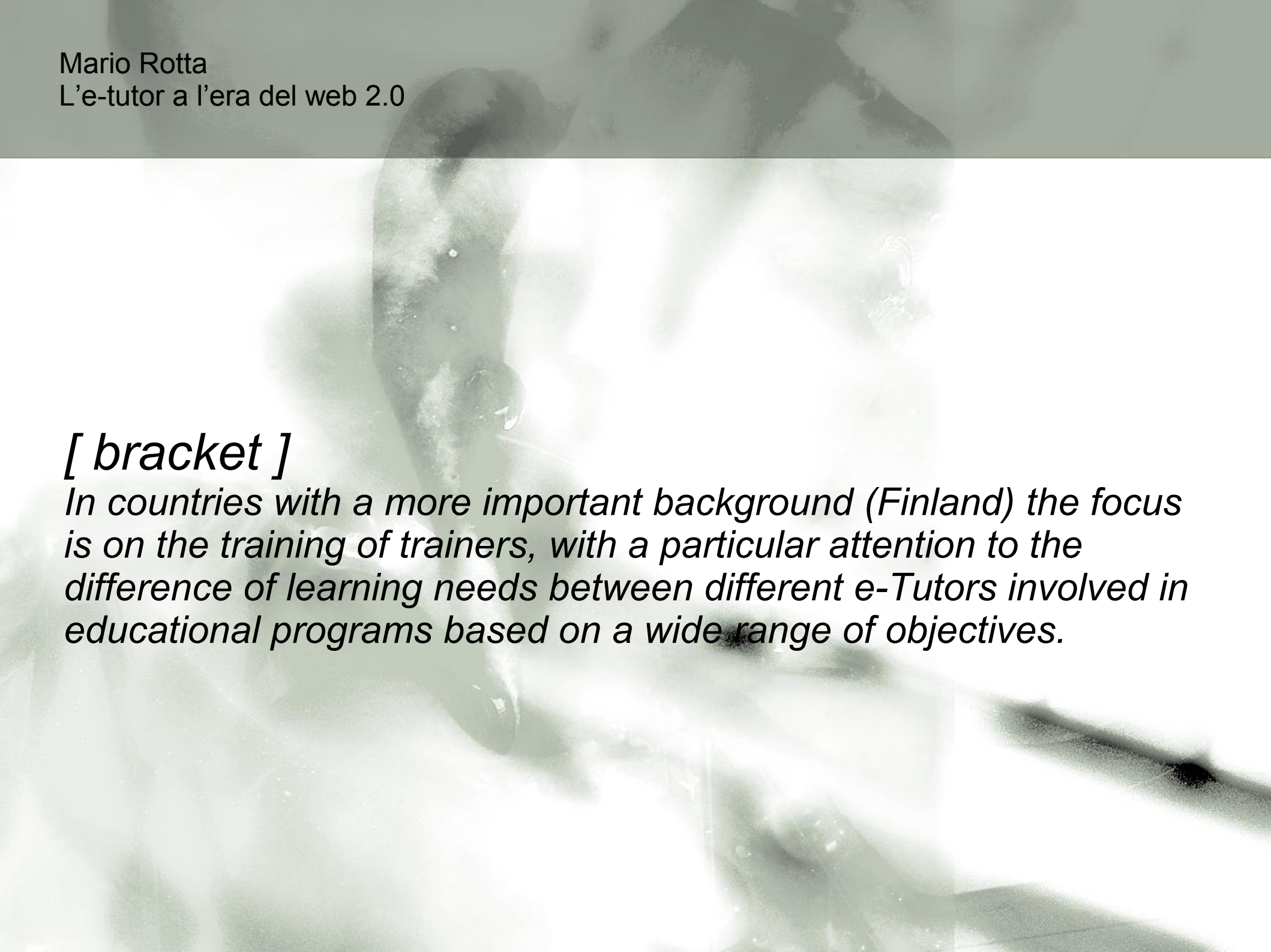
In some countries in which the e-Learning is not yet so diffused (Greece, Austria) the core competencies of the e-Tutor are still identified in technical expertise and in the capability to manage platforms, to design simple learning objects and to support them in delivering.



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In countries with a more important background (Finland) the focus is on the training of trainers, with a particular attention to the difference of learning needs between different e-Tutors involved in educational programs based on a wide range of objectives.

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In the French perspective a consolidated debate and research (Jacquinot, 2002; Rodet, 2008) aims to put in evidence the metacognitive role of the e-Tutor, focusing especially on psychological skills.

In Italy, a two-years inquiry sponsored by AIF (the Italian Association of Trainers) and supported by a lot of stakeholders (universities, the e-Learning Italian Society or SIeL, public and private organizations) defined the e-Tutor as the first certificated e-Learning professional.

In defining profile, skills and training policies for e-Tutors, the AIF research team accepts the theoretical framework of Denis (2004) comparing it with other models (Kemshal-Bell, 2001) and considering the Training Foundation quality assurance strategy. It also focuses on the relationship between e-Tutor skills and the learning experience as a complex process. But two important upgrades are introduced...

The primary innovation is in the articulation of the certification program. It considers a double-level opportunity for professional e-Tutors. So, an e-Tutor can firstly request a “basic” certificate, called simply e-Tutor. Then, a “basic” e-Tutor can request an “advanced” certification as “Content Expert”, “Educational Manager” or “Community Facilitator”.

The “Content Expert” is not simply a SME (as defined in management studies or even in Instructional Design), neither an e-Teacher as in Training Foundation programs: he is an e-Tutor with a deep expertise in facilitating students on a defined content (Lentell, 2003), able in sharing an epistemological vision of the matter and in designing learning strategies strictly oriented to the content itself.

The “Educational Manager” (in Italian “manager didattico”, a profile usually scheduled in universities as in complex organizations, even in a more traditional role) is an expert in managing the virtual learning environment from a methodological perspective, but above all he is an “evaluator” of the whole learning process.

Finally, the "Community Facilitator" identifies the main profile of the e-Tutor ready for the challenge of Web 2.0 and related instances. He has been described as a professional capable to start up a virtual learning community, as in collaborative scenarios, as in experiences based on a more informal approach, focusing on the engagement of members of various kinds of social networks (communities of practice, professional communities, alumni groups and other).

The AIF framework is clearly more complete than other international programs. But the real innovation is in a parallel inquiry on how to extend the Denis "functional" scheme to the specific competencies to be spent by the e-Tutor in 2.0 growing marketplace. So, thinking to the related certificated profile of the "Community Facilitator", we added other 3 "functions" to the 11 described by Denis, all strictly oriented toward a new configuration of the role of the e-Tutor.

First we defined the e-Tutor as a **community manager**: this function requires advanced skills and capabilities in building working groups, activating and planning communities of learners (Rosenberg, 2001), facilitating the start up of communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2000), addressing all the participants as to their own as to shared goals and motivating learners in effective sharing knowledge and social interacting (Mason & Weller, 2000; Salmon, 2002).

Applying a perspective coming from andragogy as from metacognition studies, we can also argue that the e-Tutor performs this function every time he tries to drive a group of learners toward a more independent level of social interaction.

Then we identified the **e-Coach** function (in Italian it could sound like “allenatore”, referring to sport activities, or “master”, referring to a games rule’s expert) as an evolution of community management capabilities, more focused on supporting individuals in improving their performances in a collaborative group, in a virtual community or in a more complex social network.

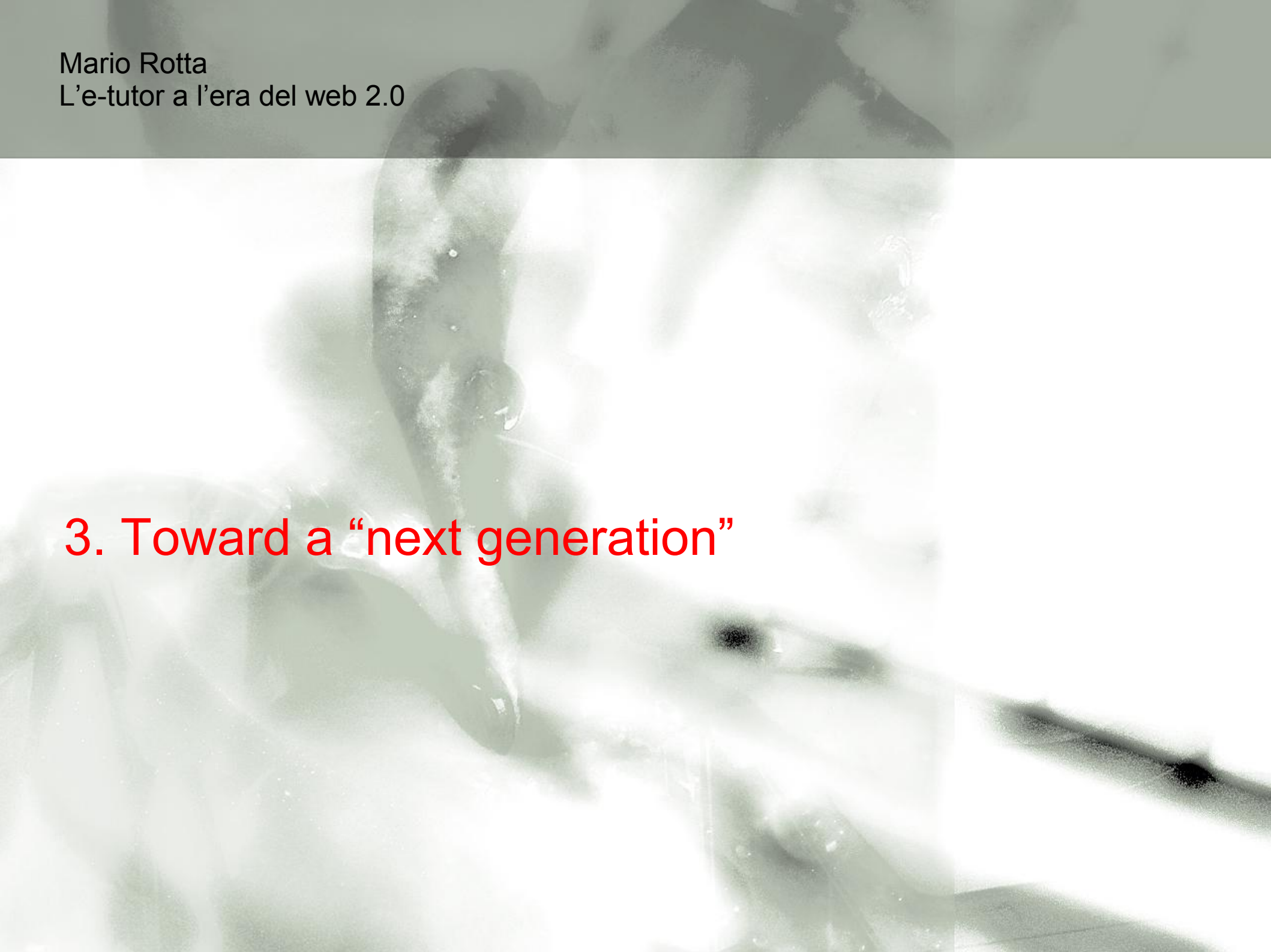
The e-Tutor as "e-Coach" must also support learners in educational role-games or in a lot of other active and collaborative learning strategies - such Problem-Based Learning or Project-Based Learning - in which factors like time management, team working, problem solving and rules knowledge are absolutely important (Rotta, 2007). In an extended interpretation of the meaning, this function can be associated also to the role of an e-Tutor when he is coordinating a team of colleagues with less experience.

Finally, we described the e-Tutor as an **e-Mentor** (otherwise called "supporter", as in Thorpe, 2002; but see also: Milne, 2005). This function identifies a set of skills to be used in supporting various kinds of complex social interactions (i.e. social tagging and social bookmarking, as knowledge sharing strategies in communities of practices) and to be activated in the planning of sustainable support services for life long learners.

But the core of this function is in the mentoring paradigm itself: can an e-Tutor act as a strategic mediator between the end of a formal learning experience and all the outcomes the learner could reach empowering his own knowledge in a continuous education perspective? We think he can do it, even it could be not so easy.

After this deep inquiry, we can summarize an extended framework to describe the e-Tutor’s role by 14 main functions and related primary and secondary skill areas to be empowered to improve the capability of the e-Tutor in every function he could perform.

Functions of the e-Tutor **[A] Primary skills** **[B] Secondary skills**	Technical skills	Content expertise	Instructional / educational skills	Management skills	Communication skills
Content facilitator		**[A]**	**[A]**	**[B]**	**[B]**
Metacognition facilitator		**[B]**	**[A]**	**[B]**	**[A]**
Process facilitator		**[B]**	**[A]**	**[A]**	**[B]**
Advisor / counsellor		**[A]**	**[B]**	**[A]**	**[B]**
Assessor	**[B]**	**[A]**	**[A]**	**[B]**	
Technical supporter	**[A]**			**[B]**	
Resource provider	**[B]**	**[A]**	**[B]**	**[A]**	
Educational manager	**[B]**		**[B]**	**[A]**	**[A]**
Designer	**[A]**	**[B]**	**[A]**		**[B]**
Co-learner	**[B]**	**[B]**	**[A]**		**[A]**
Researcher		**[B]**	**[A]**	**[B]**	**[A]**
Community manager		**[B]**	**[B]**	**[A]**	**[A]**
e-Coach		**[B]**	**[A]**	**[A]**	**[B]**
e-Mentor		**[A]**	**[A]**	**[B]**	**[B]**



3. Toward a “next generation”

New researches have a double aim: exploring possible new “features” to set up a “next generation” e-Tutor, more actual than the profile encoded by learning organizations or international standards, and at the same time focusing on a more simple framework to describe the e-Tutor’s role.

Firstly, we may focus on the conceptual definition of “e-Knowledge” (as a wider scenario than the e-Learning) and more in detail on the profile of the so-called “e-knower”, as an evolution of the profile of the “e-learner”, or “virtual student” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

By this way, to identity the new role of the e-Tutors in their interactions with learners we must firstly ask us what really means to be a really “good” e-knower today. Comparing literature and reflecting on these assets, we can identify a set of emerging issues.

- *Searching*
- *Knowledge hunting*
- *Critical Thinking*
- *Self-mentoring*
- *Self-evaluating*
- *Managing knowledge*
- *Interacting effectively*
- *Connecting and Networking*
- *Re-mediating*
- *Envisioning*

New “e-knowers” need to be supported in performing the issues described. This may involve the empowerment of some well identified e-Tutor’s functions, so the encoding of new functions to be added to the Denis framework and related extensions.

The functions to be empowered seem to be almost the "process facilitator", the "advisor/counsellor", the "resource provider", the "co-learner" and the "e-Coach"...

e-learner or e-knower skill to be improved and supported	*Primary e-tutoring function to be applied to the improvement of e-learners and e-knowers*	*Other e-tutoring functions useful to reach the goal*
☐ *searching*	resource provider	process facilitator
☐ *knowledge hunting*	resource provider	metacognition facilitator
☐ *critical thinking*	co-learner	resource provider
☐ *self-mentoring*	process facilitator	e-Coach, e-Mentor
☐ *self-evaluating*	advisor/counsellor	metacognition facilitator
☐ *managing knowledge*	resource provider	process facilitator
☐ *interacting effectively*	process facilitator	e-Coach, e-Mentor
☐ *connecting and networking*	e-Coach	community manager
☐ *re-mediating*	process facilitator	co-learner, designer
☐ *envisioning*	metacognition facilitator	designer

But by this way we could also re-think the functional framework for the e-Tutor’s profile, adjusting some definitions or adding new functions more oriented to these *scaffolding* needs.

For example, it appears easy adding a function we could call "*motivator*", widely described as a soft set of skills to improve the need of e-learners and e-knowers to be driven in their user-centred and process-oriented experience (according to several studies focusing on the relevance of motivational role of the e-Tutor, i.e. the same OTIS research or the ISEeT framework).

Then, we could imagine more sophisticated functions (not yet explored by the research).

A. The "*media educator*": a function to be spent in supporting envisioning and re-mediating needs of e-knowers, but also a well studied instructional role to help learners in understanding new media.

B. The “*discrete connector*”: a specific extension of the community manager skills, focused on the back-end actions needed to drive e-knowers in a more effective self-evaluation of their own networking and communicating capabilities.

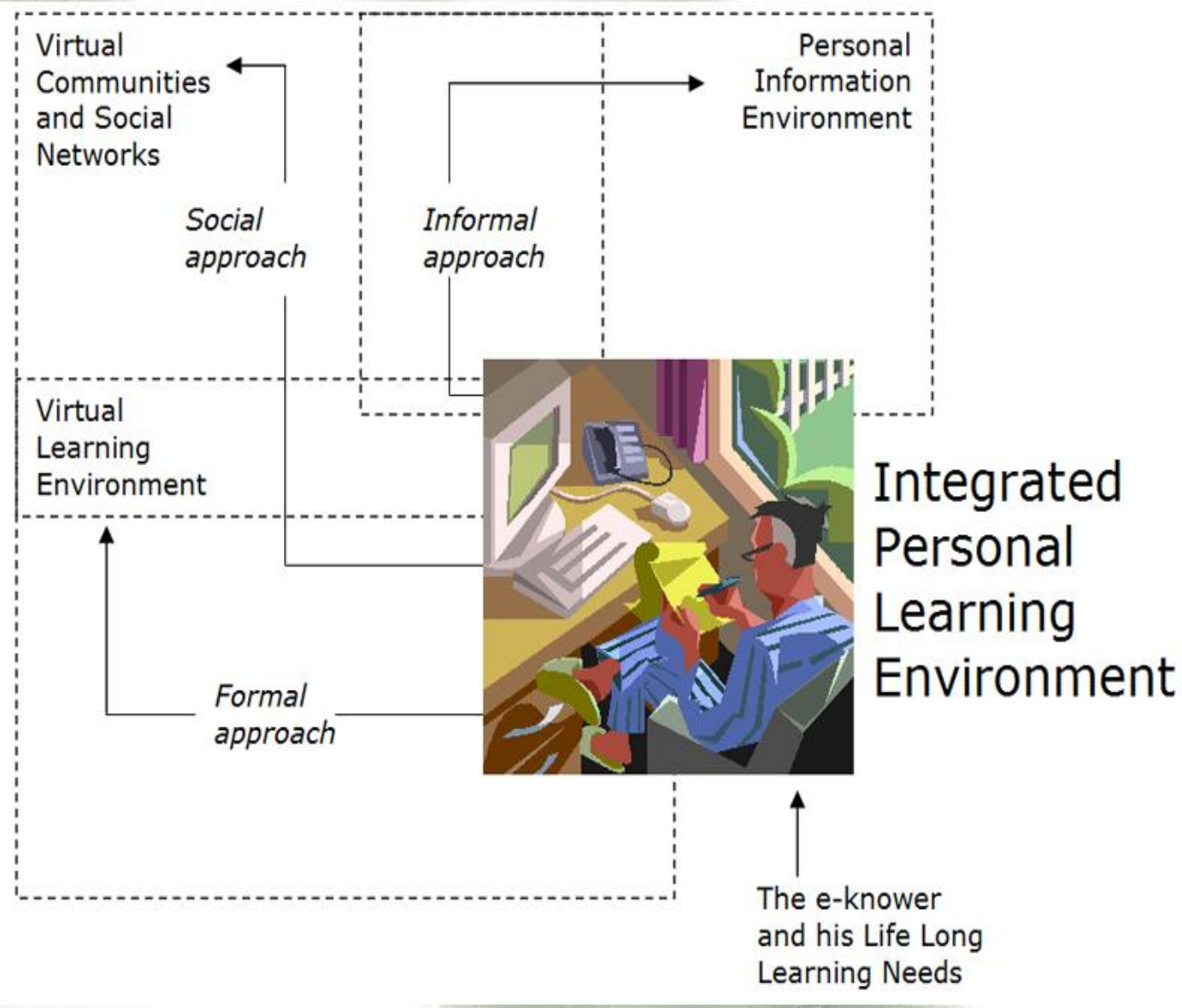
C. The "*serendipitous fellow*": an advanced co-learning function integrated with information brokering skills, applied to the e-knowers' need to explore non-conventional resources on the Web.

D. The "*problem setter*": a function to be spent in problem-based and problem-solving educational strategies, i.e. the educational role of the e-Tutor when he is helping a student to identify and compare resources and points of view to solve a simple problem (like in a web quest) or more and more complex problems, like in case-study solution searching.

But this speculative inquiry is really useful? It might only help us to built a too much complicated theoretical framework (up to 19 main functions at the moment!), with a few possibility to be applied. So, we had to evaluate other hypotheses, focusing on the more relevant e-Tutor's actions in emerging scenarios, starting from the relationship between learners and learning in the upcoming lifelong education. This is probably the way to plan an experimental strategy for next years...

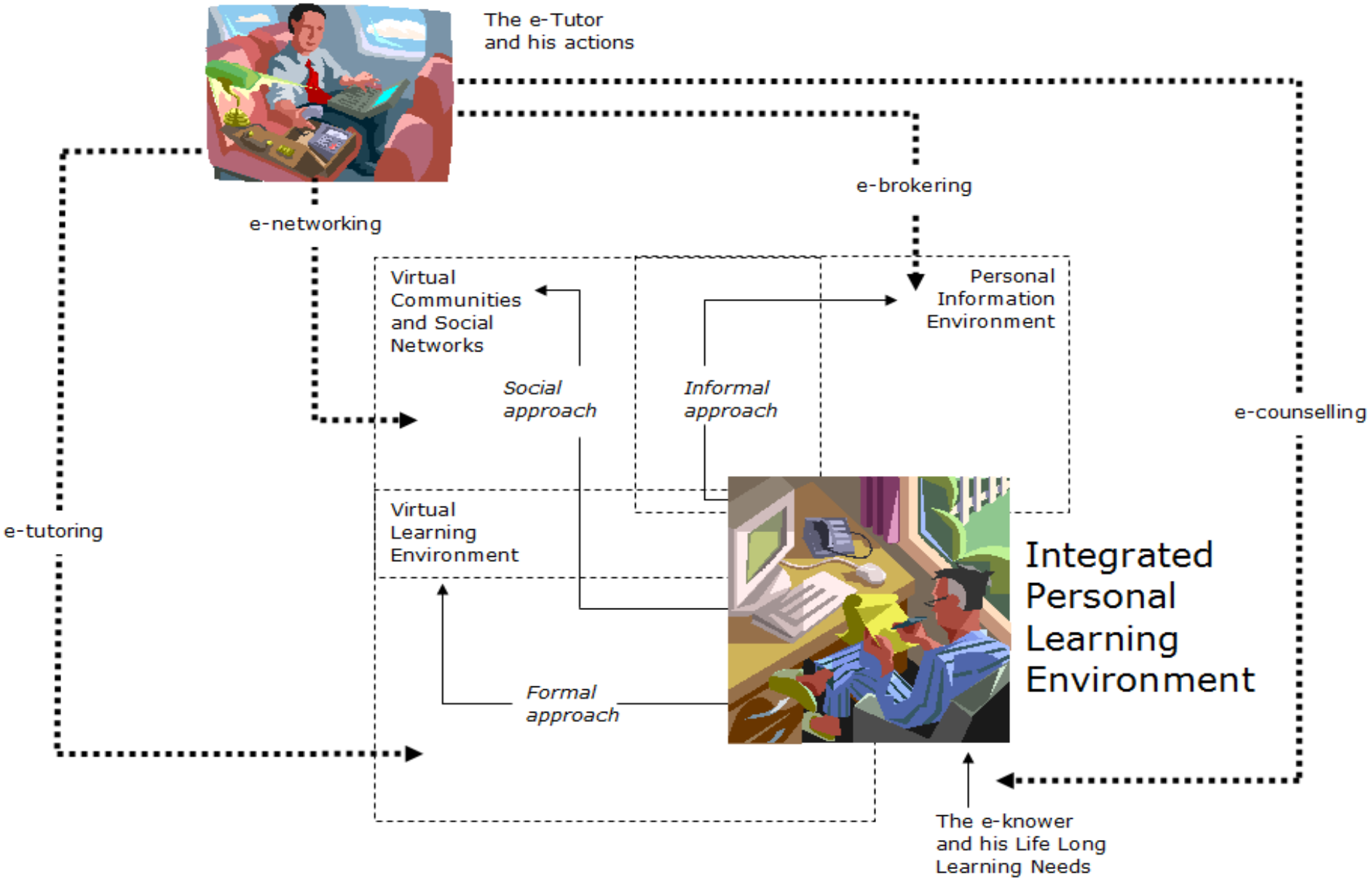
The primary concept to be explored was the "Integrated Personal Learning Environment" (IPLE). An IPLE can be described as a dynamic answer to lifelong learning needs of every e-knower enough aware (or motivated by the context, i.e. if he is a professional with less time to spend or an adult with just-in-time or just-in-case needs) to learn usually following a three-way integrated strategy: a *formal* approach, an *informal* approach and a *social* approach.

This is a visual synthesis of an Integrated Personal Learning Environment framework



Actually, most of e-Tutors are involved only in the formal area, supporting courses, assessing learning or driving e-tivities. So, we have to complete the framework strategically addressing e-Tutors toward a more integrated scaffolding. First, we can allocate the e-Tutors in all the areas of the integrated environment, focusing on the roles he can interpret in such a scenario.

By this way, we can track easily the e-Tutor’s “core actions” referred to the different areas in which the e-knowers can interact, identifying a new vision of the e-Tutor’s strategic role in a perspective beyond the learning 2.0 paradigm.


The e-Tutor
and his actions
e-networking
e-brokering
Virtual
Communities
and Social
Networks
Personal
Information
Environment
Social
approach
Informal
approach
e-counselling
e-tutoring
Virtual
Learning
Environment
Integrated
Personal
Learning
Environment
Formal
approach
The e-knower
and his Life Long
Learning Needs

The primary action to be considered as essential is the *e-counselling*: the e-knowers must to be supported and advised to set all their learning needs and find an integrated solution by a blending of formal, informal and social approaches.

The strictly *e-tutoring* action on the formal approach area is the more similar to the “traditional” role of the e-Tutor: widely analyzed by the literature and explained above, this main action is anyway much important in all its functions, usually the content, the process and the metacognition facilitator.

The *e-brokering* action is quite innovative: the core function related is the “resource provider”, according to its extended definition. But the specialist e-Tutors involved in this area will have also to improve technical skills for effective working with personal information environments (including the capability to program intelligent agents for data mining), and strong attitudes to knowledge management and to a semantic approach to web resources.

Finally, in *e-networking* role the e-Tutor could be an independent third part between the e-knowers and the networks in which they are interested or involved: helping the e-knowers in selecting the more goaled toward their learning (or professional) needs; drawing the architectures of their active participation; motivating them to share expertise, information, problems and more, so they could gather useful resources and build new knowledge.

Most part of this framework has been adopted by E-Form (one of the most important Italian consortia between universities and other stakeholders) to activate a support service for lifelong learners called PAL (Personal Assisted Learning).

4. Training policies & professional empowerment

How can we become good e-Tutors in next future? For a lot of years teachers or trainers learned to be e-Tutors in two typical ways: attending formal courses, usually on computer mediated communication, e-Learning theories, virtual identity and instructional strategies; and directly by doing, supporting individuals or moderating groups of learners, often without adequate background to do it.

The European Core Curriculum for e-Tutors in Vocational Education and Training (VET) defined inside the ISEeT project is yet founded on 5 traditional modules:

- Facilitating supporting and promoting learning online
- E-learning theory in practice
- Using technology in e-learning
- E-learning and course design
- Assessment and e-learning

Starting from new researches and from the frameworks and the applications explained above, now we are identifying other strategies for more effective “next generation” e-Tutors training policies. A role evolving toward a more and more complex articulation needs firstly a real professional training.

Various frameworks (Denis, 2003; Kemshal-Bell, 2001; Salmon, 2000) and specific studies on e-Tutors improvement by a comparative analysis of a lot of quality-oriented experiences (Rotta & Ranieri, 2005), agree on a 7 steps well-structured training strategy oriented to Life Long Learning.

1. Activation
2. Problem setting and critical thinking
3. Building knowledge (core competencies)
4. Modelling and planning strategies
5. Simulations
6. Professional training by apprenticeship
7. Continuous vocational training

Most of the e-Tutors training programs are generally restricted to the only step 3 or, sometimes, to steps from 1 to 4, according to more innovative instructional models or more specific needs. Simulations (step 5) are rarely scheduled in the courses for e-Tutors, probably because they are a hard step to be managed. Professional and continuous training are yet opportunities to be explored.

Anyway, a first application of the whole framework above explained is close to be activated, as a pre-requirement to be professional e-Tutors performing their role inside the Personal Assisted Learning (PAL) project by E-Form and as a development of the AIF (Italian Association of Trainers) quality certification strategy. We call this innovative training program “e-Tutor UP”: it will be delivered firstly in Italian and soon (we hope) in various European languages.

Although it is early to evaluate the outcomes of the program, now we are moving clearly toward a real professional empowerment strategy for the “next generation” of e-Tutors.

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