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Ensino à Distância: Desafios Pedagógicos Distance Education: Pedagogical Challenges

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PORTO UNIVERSIDADE FERNANDO PESSOA 2011

An experience of authorship, pedagogical mediation and research in DE (Distance Education)

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(Translated by Fátima Silva)

Abstract: This paper presents a collaborative experience of two teachers of higher education institutions which offer a Degree in Visual Arts through ICT - Information Communication Technologies - or distance education. The text is divided into the contextualization of the course reported by the teacher coordinator and then the reflection of authorship and mediation reported by the teacher partner. The report also includes that teacher's experience as a CAPES fellow-researcher and post-doctoral at UFP/Porto, in "Production of knowledge in digital media".

Keywords: Distance education. Collaborative experience. Authorship. Mediation.

1. Introduction

With the increasing demand for teacher training in basic education and the consequent incentive of the Brazilian Federal Government through the public policies implemented by the Ministry of Education (MEC) to create higher education distance courses, Brazilian public universities are in the process of consolidation of a compromised pedagogical attitude with inclusive

educational objectives. Hence, criteria and parameters have been established to control and guarantee the quality of the services rendered to society.

DE systems arise, in this context, as a constructivist pedagogical project – since they are based on the socio-interactionist concept of teaching – and are processed through Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), which generate new social behaviors,

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requiring critical pedagogical practice. Indeed, distance education, distinct from traditional education, has proved to be rather complex, with its own characteristics, as its fundamental element is not spatiality but rather communication; and its space is not physical, but communicative.

Undeniably, in Brazil, DE is in a promising phase, since it is beginning to be understood as “education” and not only as “modality” of “distance” teaching, to be used in certain situations. The term “distance” has also been questioned. At the Federal University of Goiás (UFG), we have chosen “online education or learning”, which indicates the creation of collaborative systems and removes the face-to-face/distance dichotomy, which, according to our experience, is not accurate. Since 2007, in our experience, the concept of distance has been diluted. We can state that the fear of impoverishment of the direct relationship between teacher and student does not exist since this occurs in other forms and the relationship is continuous and intensive. It can be assumed that these new students, future visual arts teachers, will be much better prepared to take full advantage of the wealth that these technologies can bring to education due to having experienced the online process of teaching-learning. Thus, we have to consider the democratization that this teaching model can foster and how universities are facing this challenge.

This didactic-pedagogical posture has led Brazilian universities to consistently reflect

on the desired quality pattern, focusing on factors such as planning, elaboration of Pedagogical Course Projects (PCP), curricula, virtual learning environments, development of educational resources, among others. This investigative attitude has led the academic community to discuss the need to establish criteria for the monitoring of disciplines through which it will be possible to ensure the quality of knowledge construction in the training process. The immediate consequence of all this is the revitalization of degrees (steadily declining in recent years) and the interest in Education research, reaffirmed by the volume of investments of the government and research institutions, following the example of the CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) and the CNPq (Technological and Scientific Development National Council), the two main research funding agencies in Brazil.

2. Training at the Open University of Brazil (UAB)

Brazil has a history of distance training ranging from technical courses offered by the Brazilian Universal Institute, founded in 1941, and many other means propagated by the dissemination of the cultural industry. In the field of formal education, distance education also has a long tradition in the Education of Young People and Adults (EJA) before called Adult Education. Telecourses, a popular way of identifying these initiatives, adopted a wide range of media – print, television, radio

– as well as partnership systems between the Ministry of Education, communications companies and the so-called S System (namely, Sesc – Commerce Social Services, Sesi – Industry Social Services – and Senai – National Service of Industrial Learning), in the case of professional training. These diverse experiences were assimilated, without great controversy, probably due to their exceptional character. Thus, they were directed, in the first example, to dilettante (or non-formal) training and, in the second case, to the education of young people and adults who were already marginalised from the educational system. We have also seen less accredited institutions advertise advantages with the offer of higher education distance courses, promising instant and superficial training. However, what we are experiencing, in an upward trend, is the distance modality penetrating into higher education, under the responsibility of public universities, distance undergraduate and postgraduate courses promoted by the new policies of the Ministry of Education.

Thus, the UAB is the name of the project created by the Ministry of Education (MEC) in 2005, under the States Forum for Education, to create the articulation and experimental integration of a national system of higher education. This system would be formed by public higher education institutions, which should provide quality public education to Brazilian municipalities where there is no offer and/or where the existing offer is insufficient for all its citizens. This experimental national network, created

to support research and higher education (including initial and continuous training) is formed by the group of public higher education institutions, in articulation and integration with the group of municipalities that build face-to-face support centres to respond to the courses offered by the universities. Today, the management of this complex system is under the responsibility of the CAPES. It is a way to provide and make education, with emphasis on mediation of the new ICTs.

According to the Ministry of Education, by Decree 5622, 19th December 2005, DE is an

education modality in which didactic-pedagogical mediation in teaching and learning processes occur with the use of resources and information and communication technologies, with students and teachers developing educational activities in different places or times.

The UAB Programme is aimed at any citizen who has completed basic education, and who meets the requirements demanded by the specific public institution. Applicants go through a selection process and enroll at certain municipality centres. The Programme was implemented with the participation of 290 face-to-face support centres which started functioning in 2007 in 289 Brazilian municipalities spread across all the States of the Federation, and has expanded each year with an ever-growing membership of universities as can be seen in the Catalog of the UAB System:

Until 2010, the UAB System foresees the establishment of one thousand centres strategically distributed in the national territory. Until 2013, the system will extend its cooperation network to reach all the Brazilian Public Institutes of Higher Education – IPES – and 800 thousand students annually. (Catálogo do Sistema Universidade Aberta do Brasil, Apresentação, 2009)

Following the example of many other federal universities, UFG has embraced the challenge and is offering several courses at a distance through the promotion of the Federal Government. The courses have the same duration as the “face-to-face” courses, four years, in the case of UFG. Students will receive the same diploma, there will be no distinction between modalities. We cannot talk of distance education as a unique model. This experience is being built from our trajectory and belief as educators in the system that we know. There are no formulae; thus, what we present in this paper are fragments of our experiences in the context of the Faculty of Visual Arts (FAV).

3. The degree/DE in Visual Arts

The FAV is one of the 25 academic units of the Federal University of Goiás and has trained professionals for the teaching of arts since the 1970s. It offers undergraduate courses in Bachelor of Visual Arts, Graphic Design, Interior Design, and Fashion Design. Furthermore, there is a Degree in Visual Arts and a Post-Graduate Programme in Art and Visual Culture. The degree receives 25 to 30

students per year from tender entrance exams. These are not all able to complete the course over the stipulated four years. Moreover, we also have the geographic question, because this small number must necessarily live in Goiânia or in neighboring towns which permit the daily commuting to the capital. With the offer of distance degrees, residents of the interior of the State have the opportunity to study for free at a public university without having to move residence.

Hence, the FAV is expanding its potential for teacher training in visual arts education and, since 2007, has offered two degrees in Visual Arts at a distance. 330 students are currently enrolled, in nine centres (cities), in the course linked to UAB while there are 230 in the course linked to the Pro-Degree project. Thinking of more than 500 students spread across 20 municipalities of the State (and even outside it) is thinking of a rhizomatic UFG, with tubers that spread and branch in places where the institution can be represented.

The curriculum design of distance degrees converse, but it is different from the face-to-face course curriculum. In the process of content construction, one has sought to integrate the experiences from the face-to-face course with the course at a distance, as is the case of experiences that involve reading and image interpreting of students in the seventh face-to-face period, which were published in material for students at a distance. Thus, virtual and face-to-face spaces were configured to carry out knowledge

construction flux. Distant courses also feature a structure compatible with face-to-face ones, including 400 hours of supervised internship and 200 hours of complementary activities, with a course load of 2,800 hours, distributed in 8 semesters. The curriculum consists of modules articulated in four thematic areas, covering the different areas of interest of the Visual Arts teacher, in agreement with the National Curriculum Guidelines, as demonstrated by the PCP. The latter presents three pillars based on the articulation between education, research and extension, which are inseparable in the process of formation. They defend a conception of the individual who thinks and transforms their practices during the learning process, while these practices interfere and articulate in the conceptual and theoretical construction of that individual. According to the PCP (2007) its philosophical pillars are:

1. *Articulation of teacher training process in visual arts with the local educational context.*

Considering teacher training closely connected with the educational reality of their municipality, understanding the existing reality and proposing changes that enrich and enhance local education in art. As such, from the beginning, joint activities are suggested that are parallel to the activities of public school education so that the benefits of the course are felt throughout students' training.

2. *Articulation of teacher training process in visual arts with the local cultural context.*

Considering teacher training in visual arts articulated to the local cultural context based on a multicultural concept of education, in which art cannot be understood as a sacred sphere for a few initiates but as a cultural good accessible to everyone. Accordingly, the following are proposed: colloquia, seminars, workshops and themes that emphasise the relationship with the community, the environment, cultural policies, the historical and cultural heritage, ethnic groups, emphasising the attention to diversity and cultural identity of each place.

3. *Articulation of teacher training process in visual arts with the use of new technologies.*

Considering teacher training in visual arts articulated with contemporary technological know-how toward education leading to the individual's autonomy, the decentralization and deprioritisation of pedagogical, cultural and artistic knowledge. Thus, the aim is learning related to knowledge and reflexive and critical ownership of the means and technological media, thereby promoting the transition from user subject to proposer/producer subject. (PCP, 2007, pp 6,7)

Faced with this proposal, we have become aware of the political-pedagogical implications of training mediated by learners' principles of intellectual autonomy, interdisciplinarity and troubleshooting, aimed at the integral formation of the visual

arts undergraduate, who will not simply be a “specialised admirer” in Art, rather an educator and a participative citizen in society.

To achieve this purpose, the curriculum of the course covers disciplines whose contents reveal interrelationships with the national and international reality, according to a historical perspective and in the context of new paradigms for the teaching of art (PCP, 2007, p. 26). Thus, the course presents a central pedagogical core that unfolds in three axes: a) Specific pedagogical training; b) General pedagogical training and c) Supervised Internships. This takes into consideration all the aspects involved in the formation of a professional teacher for the visual arts. The course is supported by philosophical and multicultural epistemological bases which aim to review the concept of art itself and its teaching, problematizing modernist form and content such as the ideas of “unique work”, “artist as genius”, “universal art” and others.

To meet the requirements of this “amplified reality”, the university relies on the resources of the MEC/FNDE (Ministry of Education and Culture/National Fund for the Development of Education) to produce teaching materials and enable teachers to teach at a distance, performing various functions such as: authors, trainers, academic advisors and centre tutors. Team formation has been one of the greatest challenges. The rhizomatic nature of the curriculum and the specificities of the teaching-learning process of distance

courses have somewhat intimidated the more conservative. Thus, teachers of other institutions were invited to produce teaching materials for some modules of the courses. This solution led to the enrichment of the team, with the pluralization of other looks and concepts that help construct the notion of a network of collaborators that surpasses regional borders.

4. Authorship experience, teacher performance and research in DE

Given this relatively promising scenario, DE teaching and research have attracted us and led us to seek an opportunity to perform in the area, which we found at the Federal University of Goiás. Thus, in this article, we will present a brief report of this experience, as teacher-author of the Degree in Visual Arts at UFG, which is part of the UAB system.

The discipline for which we elaborate didactic material, **Reading and Text Production**, integrates the so-called “Transversal Theme”, which, each semester/module, spans the specific core content themes of the Visual Arts field. The idea was to include in each module a transversal theme exploring the thematic of Visual and/or Pedagogical Arts in order to render the viability of a truly transversal curriculum. It was included in the introductory course module, along with the other: PCP, Education Guiding Principles and Fundamentals of DE. It, thus, aimed to consider the possibility of blending with these disciplines in order to encourage

interdisciplinarity and the development of critical sense and learner autonomy.

The discipline aimed to carry out a comparative study and production of different text modalities, in addition to systematic reading of literary and media support, in order to identify the points of confluence and interaction that interpret their referential and symbolic dimensions. It advocated an interdisciplinary approach covering the various levels of language understanding while a socio-economic, aesthetic and cultural process in contemporary society. It discussed the approximations and convergences of writing in the pictorial and literary space, and in cyberspace, developing concepts of literacy and digital inclusion.

The pedagogic work primarily proposed the research of poetry as an aesthetic object and a fundamental element of human formation. This raised questions that would foster reflections on the use of poetic text in primary school by emphasising aesthetic aspects, which value the poem as such and not as a pretext for teaching other knowledge, such as, the mother tongue. Thus, our educational proposal called for the systematic study and comparison of different methods of Art (plastic, performing, visual) in its relationship with Poetry (while a strictly literary aesthetic modality), in search of points of confluence and interaction between them, and, above all, envisioning the intermediate production.

The discipline, with 50 credit hours per year, distributed in four thematic units and an introductory unit, highlighted, in each, an important aspect of the undergraduate's training, as a future teacher, in dealing with their mother tongue, in a wide range of social contexts that surround them. The didactic material, which appeared as a book format (printed) and CDR, in addition to the unabridged post in the Virtual Learning Environment, was made available to students. Thus, even those who were in distant places, far from the centre to have access to the virtual lab, could consult the printed materials and follow the content that was studied.

In the Introductory Unit, the items dealt with the progress of the discipline: thematic approach, objectives, didactic proposals and functioning. Unit I, entitled **Virtual Culture: between being and knowing**, discussed the new context of production and acquisition of knowledge in today's society, highlighting the role of the media in building concepts and values. In this unit, space was opened for the first discussion Forum on the new forms of writing in the technological society and the excessive volume of information produced in this context. In Unit II, **Literacy and digital inclusion**, together, we sought to construct a concept of literacy and discover its implications for what has been called "digital inclusion". Unit III, **Textual genres**, developed notions of textuality, developing reading and writing concepts, leading to familiarity with the range of modalities and natures of textual genres, in

their social practices. Unit IV, **Between the text and the screen: speech interfaces**, the undergraduates were invited to read text and screen, experiencing artistic appraisal which showed them the multiple faces of speech in DE and awakened them to aesthetic pleasure, by educating the look!

The whole teaching-learning process was based on Vygotsky's sociointeractionist theory, which establishes a "zone of proximal development" that enables the collaborative construction of knowledge between those involved. This process unravelled interactive experiences, both in the VLE and in face-to-face moments or field research, which students carried out in their own cities, assisted by academic supervisors (VLE tutors) and centre tutors.

In the same project, we were also the teacher-trainer of academic supervisors (VLE tutors) of the four centres of inland Goiás (Uruana, São Simão, Goianésia and Formosa) and educational proofreader of the material produced by the other teachers who taught the initial modules of the course, from August 2007 to July 2008. Thus, we were able to capture various aspects involved in the process of material construction, and its acceptance by students and other actors, as well as to assess the quality of participants' interactivity in the Virtual Learning Environment (*moodle*) and group interaction, in their own process of knowledge and collective intelligence construction.

Even before the production of didactic material, we underwent a process of didactic-pedagogical training, initiated by a course of 120 hours over a period of four months, with three face-to-face meetings, taught at the Federal University of Mato Grosso - UFMT, a pioneer in DE in Brazil. This enabled us to become familiar with the *moodle* environment (VLE public domain) and with all peculiarities of distance education. In the following four months, the texts were effectively drafted, with the planning, scheduling and the likely assessment process for this module.

This first internship gave us insights into a number of fundamental factors that ensure the appropriate progress of the process: a) understanding PCP (philosophical basis of the course, egress profile, interaction between the modules), b) coherence between objectives, planning, contents covered and module evaluation system, c) understanding the peculiarities of digital language and the virtual text and d) quality of the interaction between all the actors involved in the teaching-learning process in DE.

In the following phases, when we worked on the training of tutors and pedagogical review, we were able to participate in teaching two training courses for academic supervisors and centre tutors, offered by the UFG. On these occasions, we prepared candidates (who had been selected by public notice) to act as mediators of pedagogical actions. These were very rich moments in which we learnt

to listen and to speak, analyzing expectations and assessing difficulties. It became fairly clear to us that all the participants who, until then, had been involved in the project, needed to become familiar with something completely new for all: the particularities of Distance Education. In the last phase, we worked directly with the academic supervisors (environment tutors), accompanying their work in every centre, by means of the virtual environment. Assessing, together with the team, the quality of this interaction on *moodle* and the access to their interaction with participants was one of the most striking aspects of this experience, which will be detailed in the final report of our research.

The following year, in 2009, our experience broadened to being the teacher-trainer of the discipline of Psychology and Knowledge Production. At this point, with some experience in DE, we were able to contribute directly with the process of knowledge construction, by means of interaction with faculty supervisors (VLE tutors) and the course students, when planning the discipline, participating in virtual forums and preparing didactic material to support the contents which had been developed.

In this setting, it is not difficult to understand the need that we felt to find alternatives for the reorganization of the contents and the language forms, thereby promoting teaching and learning strategies in DE. This is undoubtedly one of the priorities of research in education in Brazil today.

Indeed, in the context of teaching and research, the teacher-author pursues clearly defined objectives, such as: a) becoming familiar with digital language, to open up hypermediatic dialogue; b) acquiring basic notions of hypermedia resources to produce didactic material in DE; c) understanding the relationship authorship-text-reception of user/reader in hypertext and digital media; d) establishing procedures for assessing distance learning.

All this led us to search greater academic and professional qualification. At that time we entered in contact with Professor Rui Torres, then Coordinator of CETIC (Centre for the Studies of Computer and Cyberliterature Text) at Fernando Pessoa University (Porto), followed by a visit to this institution. This occurred during our stay in Portugal to participate in the Ibero-American Congress in Art Education: "Sentidos Transibéricos", in Beja, between 22 and 24 May 2008, with the team of researchers from FAV/UFG, who reported their experiences with DE in Brazil.

Since then, we have conducted post-doctoral research in "Production of knowledge in digital media" at UFP, under the supervision of Professor Rui Torres. This research started in September 2009 and ended in August 2010. We are currently in the post-doctoral internship at UFP, at the Centre for the Studies of Communication, Language and Behavior (CECLICO), continuing our research.

Thus, throughout this research, we proposed a discussion on the peculiarities of production of digital text, to mediate the DE teaching-learning process. The object of study was interaction and interactivity among Visual Arts academics at UFG, from which we constructed methodological strategies to optimise our educational practices. It is worth emphasising here that we reformulated the didactic material produced in 2007, integrating the re-edition for the new centres, in a collection entitled *Tramas e Urdumes*, published in 2010 by the UFG.

Continuing our research in DE, we initially approached the issue of on-screen reading, discussing the aspects involved in this phenomenon, common to computerised cultures, which is a key differential to the individual's involvement in the movement of knowledge, within the current technological society. This involves research of the students' reading experiences, opening the debate with the VLE tutors on the notion of literacy, poetic fruition and literary reading. What is literacy? What does it mean to be "literate" in the current context? How can we face the different literacy "events" that the technological society presents every day? Questions such as these will be discussed in the context of this research.

According to Kleiman (1995, p. 19), today we can define *writing skills* as a set of social practices that use writing as a symbolic system and as technology, in specific contexts, for specific goals. In fact, language,

as a social phenomenon, is structured actively and in a group from a cultural and social point of view. In addition, this also applies to electronic text.

On the subject, Lévy (1993) emphasises, in this context, the fundamental role of writing technologies as one of the *intellectual technologies* responsible for generating different thinking styles; for him, the intellectual technologies do not determine, but condition, cognitive and discursive processes. This issue must be considered, particularly, in terms of language. Thus, greater reflection is required on technical and linguistic changes that anchor the social construction of different types of culture: oral culture, writing and cybernetics. This is how textual genres appear as social routines of our everyday life. When we teach the functioning of a genre, we teach the socio-discursive way to act in a culture rather than simple textual production (Marcuschi, 2006, p. 24, 25). These issues and others which are involved in the knowledge construction process in the context of distance education have been the target of our reflection in this research.

On the other hand, we also discuss the most specific aspects of the production of didactic material for the context of distance education, highlighting the relevance of *interactivity and interaction* experiences in cyberspace. In this respect, the Chilean researcher, Viviana Oyarzún (2008, p. 111), establishes a curious differentiation between these terms:

Interactivity is not equal to interaction: while the first refers to the process of responding to auditory and visual stimuli, proceeding from a certain technology, the second refers to the relationship between action and reaction that occurs between people; interactivity lies in the scope of perception and interaction on the plane of communication.

An interesting issue entails pondering on the role of each player involved in the process of distance teaching-learning, from the teacher-author (who has no direct contact with the student, but is responsible for material preparation, tool selection and planning of an entire module to be developed in the virtual environment), including the teacher-trainer (accompanying the whole process together with VLEs tutors, throughout the module or discipline) and VLEs tutors (who work directly with students in the virtual environment) to the centre tutors (who assist students in the local centre). The quality levels of interactivity and, mainly, of interaction is one of the essential factors to the smooth running of a DE course.

This reality also poses new challenges to the teacher-author in DE, in their role of forming an individual capable of behaving socially, in the book culture, now mixed with non-literary genres and audiovisual media. Such a scenario requires willingness to invest in innovative teaching strategies that seek the contribution of different media and explore the range of features offered by ICTs, present in contemporary social relations – fertile ground for our educational intervention.

Effectively, recent distance education projects have represented a process and a promise of unprecedented cultural inclusion. It is surprising that, even though the constant complaints about lack of investment in education in Brazil are founded, they nevertheless require our investment in a bold search for an alternative. We cannot close our eyes to changes in the concept of higher education offers when we see the main Brazilian universities reaching the most remote municipalities. In this case the means is, once more, the message because it synthesises a new standard of artistic and cultural diffusion. Retrieving Umberto Eco's terms on these issues, it is insufficient to just place ourselves in favour (integrated) or against (apocalyptic) the presence of new media in our daily life or in education. Being part of contemporary reality, as in the traditional school, in this new environment the challenge of education is also to construct this new project with the always needed critical consciousness that not everything is grist to the mill (Guimarães and Losada, 2008).

The experience of text production both as author and trainer (Professor Deborah) and as coordinator of the course (Professor Leda) reported here has offered us the opportunity to put aside theory and live in practice the concepts of collaborativity, interactivity, partnerships and interdisciplinarity. These items are important for an effective pedagogical process; however, in a course using technologies, they become

indispensable. Individuality, one of the traits of the modern concept of unique subjectivity, untouchable, immutable, falls apart in the collaborative actions of learning in DE. Notions are reinvented, partnerships constructed and assigned new meanings, the concept of network expands so that we may continue to perform in distance education in accordance with the processuality of our experiences.

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