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# Introduction

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The concept of Distance Education (DE) is constantly evolving, as technology, pedagogy, and student needs change. Much more than a delivery method, DE is fundamentally an approach to learning, stressing its adaptability to the learners' lives, needs, and experience.

DE may also be seen as universal. Its universality does not simply refer to the fact that it is available for people all around the globe, but it also means that the technology used to deliver DE is available in standard, uniform, yet flexible, ways.

DE also tends to provide maximum accommodation to different learning preferences and styles. Generally, this is due to its flexibility. Nowadays, there are numerous ways to promote meaningful interactions with students, any time, any place. Furthermore, since online courses involve access to virtual libraries, research resources also expand exponentially.

In this context, faculty roles evolve to be guides and encouraging mentors. Instructors seek to provide focused and clear guidance for students, especially when the work requires research, writing, and making connections with the contemporary world. This can also take situated learning to a new level, since mobility and flexibility allow students to bring content and context together.

DE can also be beneficial in terms of inclusion. If an e-learning programme is well designed, it will accommodate diverse learning styles, be culturally inclusive, encourage the exchange of ideas, and have flexible technical requirements.

Given the potential of e-learning to be so inclusive and flexible, it has a high potentiality for distribution and dissemination. This situation indubitably represents a challenge to Pedagogy, as it implies the need to consider adequate pedagogical strategies to make a high-quality education available for everyone.

The current issue of this journal – **Distance Education: Pedagogical Challenges** – seeks to analyse and discuss the ways in which new developments in the science of learning contrast with old-fashioned approaches still dominating classrooms, lecture theatres and training facilities as much as it aims to rethink pedagogy arising both from the growing body of evidence available from online approaches and from pedagogical practice behind the use of technology in education.

The success of Distance Education (DE) courses depends, in the first place, on effective designing and planning. A leading researcher in the field of DE, and creator of the U-M-T Approach – Unit-Module-Topic Approach – for designing and delivering effective online courses, Michael Simonson, in his article, expands on this basic design approach.

He further discusses assessment strategies and student time allocations in order to produce the perfectly designed online course, which is not simply based on readings in texts, handouts, and information on the Internet. High quality online courses require the instructors/teachers to place an emphasis on the use of various forms of visual media to offer instructional content, for instance, videos, visual presentations with accompanying audio, and other graphical representations.

The great changes occurring in the workplace and the challenges placed by the Information Society require educational institutions to consider continuous training and lifelong learning in a new perspective. In his article, Paulo Rurato argues that knowledge of potential distance learners, namely family, personal and professional life, the available technology resources, technology skills, as well as motivation and learning preferences, allows both (learners and facilitators) access to the mechanisms that ease the adoption of learning strategies and that enhance the possibility of a well-succeeded learning experience. The use of

SORT - Student Online Readiness Tool – and Schrum and Hong's set of seven dimensions for a distance learning environment allows the setting of positive learning experiences.

A positive teaching, and learning, experience is presented in the case-study about the use of the Drop-box as an e-Portfolio in English Language courses at UFP. Even prior to the implementation of the Bologna Process, which emphasises the acquisition of foreign language competences, all the courses at this university have had two foreign languages in the curricula: English and another foreign language. In their article, Fátima Silva and Isabel Patim show how learners' language competence is assessed through the research reports and the project work, which are dropped in the UFPUV, in addition to the follow-up interviews in class. Thus, English language teaching is complemented by this tool, mainly using collaborative strategies.

A collaborative experience is also reported by Débora Silva and Leda Guimarães, two teachers working in Brazilian higher education institutions, which offer Degrees in Visual Arts through ICT – Information Communication Technologies – or distance education. The text is divided into two parts: the first is about the course contextualization reported by the coordinator, which reports on the Open University of Brazil (UAB) which aims to provide quality public education to Brazilian municipalities where there is no, or limited, educational opportunities. Part two is a reflection on the performance of

authorship and student mediation in DE and the researcher's experience as a Capes fellow-researcher, post-doc at UFP/Porto, in the area of "Production of knowledge in digital media".

Pedro Reis and Isabel Damião's article focuses on e-content which, according to the authors, plays an important role in e-learning. e-Content and e-learning face a number of challenges in the production of viable modules for information enriched society and institutions. Hence, e-learning developers feel the need, for instance, to increase collaboration among learners, to create relevant practical activities for learners to participate in, and to create content that today's learners will find engaging. This represents an essentially intellectual and creative challenge, which is, basically, to produce imaginative, engaging and interactive designs that work with the browsers used by the target audiences, within realistic bandwidth constraints.

In this context, this article stresses the importance of authoring tools for e-learning (such as eXe-learning, Xerte or CourseLab) which make it easy for e-learning developers to employ a relatively wide range of interactive techniques and to have their content integrated with a Learning Management System, at moderate costs or even for free. Thus, this article shows how experts may work directly with these tools, populating the templates with content, and how these digital contents may be stored in

databases, converted to standard HTML for publication.

Establishing a triangulation with this theme of digital educational contents, the article by Bruno Cardina, Jerónimo Francisco and Pedro Reis initially approaches the generational gaps in school learning. The authors begin by providing the framework in relation to the term *digital native* in order to identify the key aspects of the generation born after the advent and the global use of the Internet. They were found to be "multitasking" people, linked to technology and connectivity, as opposed to *digital immigrants*, born in an earlier period and seeking to adapt to the technological world. The authors also approach these students' strategic capacities and how, thanks to technology and information resources, these have made the school institution adapt to them, and how these changes have made teachers alter traditional teaching and encouraged them to modify their methods with the construction of educational contents in ICT in the form of learning objects, as a new form of education or a complement of education and a way to instil self-learning.

Besides the above articles, the current issue includes two reports, one by Rui Torres, on the Po-Ex'70/80 project, and the other is a case study of UFP-UV (Virtual University), within the scope of the study "Pedagogic-didactic usefulness and effectiveness of distance learning platforms", integrated in the project: "Manage, Know, Intervene"

(co-financed by the Technical Assistance Operational Programme (POAT), FSE branch, of the QREN) elaborated by the Employment and Vocational Training Institute, IP (IEFP, IP), National Centre for the Qualification of Instructors (CNQF) of the Department for Vocational Training.

It follows, from all these approaches, that the challenges facing DE involve the adoption of solutions that promote flexibility to the access of learning resources, promote interaction and cooperation, enabling the reuse and interoperability of educational contents, implement appropriate pedagogical strategies to improve learning, make the search for educational resources easier and provide courses adapted to students' needs.