# Distance Education and its Different Forms of Learning – New Learners?

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## ABSTRACT

*This article is part of a research carried out by a Group of Studies and Researches about Educational Technology and Distance Education (GETED) and it aims to enrich the theory about how to learn at the virtual context reflecting at the students learning conceptions from this modality. With the objective of analysing the relation between the Distance Education and the new forms of learning, if we can consider them as new, we start the work articulating the concepts of information and knowledge and the new ways of knowledge with the participants excerpts of a graduation course offered at the distance modality. After that, we discuss the question of autonomy at the distance learning process, also with some exemplifications of the collected data at the offered course. The next theme in discussion is the collaborative learning with focus on the interaction. We end the article pointing at some conclusions about how the students see the new learning at the distance education context.*

**Key-words: Learning; Distance Education; Interaction; Collaboration; Autonomy**

## Introduction

When we worry about increasing the reach of the Education and, specially, by means of Distance Education, we have inside this idea, some other worries which can be definitive for its success. How does the student learn at this modality? Are the new educational public prepared to this challenge?

This article makes part of a research realized by the Group of Studies and Researches about Educational Technology and Distance Education (GETED) and it aims to make a deep theoretical foundation about how to learn in a virtual context looking at the conceptions of the students'learning at this modality.

Learn to learn is a new challenge that asks today for much more flexibility about the space and the time, personal and group activities, less rigid content and more opened processes of research and communication, accordingly to the following excerpts:

> My relation to the technology is not of atraction or disdain, not even fear, it is a curiosity of learning how to use it to obtain satisfaction. The technology in my social life improved a lot my life quality and at the academic life, it offered opportunities of entering into a University course and it let me study without going out of my office. Some time ago I would not have condition as there was not telephone, fax, computer, Internet, etc. (Ricardo[i])

> At the education, there was an improvement of the research, more conditions to study and mainly the oportunity to spread the culture, the knowledge and the teaching to the people who need and do not have conditions to move for this searching. (Alex)

> The great difficulty of the participants of this new class model would be to detach the old methods of class. To transform these students in researchers and good communicators and their teachers in motivators, it is a considerable challenge. So, we have to rethink the whole teaching system, specially in preparing the new educators. (Marcelo)

We can say that one of the learner's task is to educate for a new relation of communication and virtual participation. Do we know how to deal with these forms of learning? Are they new forms of learning or the ones we have dreamed for a long time: collaborative, interactive, communicative and contextualized forms?

## 1. A new education asks for a new learner: information and knowledge

To understand better how to learn in a determined teaching methodology, we need to reflect about the historical context we are inside and the characteristics of the education and the knowledge at this context.

Alarcão [1] refers to the society in which we live as a complex, contradictory and flooded by information which claims for new competences of access, evaluation and management of the offered information. The author also calls attention to the main compentence to be acquiredat the current society: the

capacity to discern, to question and to reflect about received information to get at the knowledge which is the capacity of contextualizing the information creating relations among them.

Coinciding to Alarcão, Valente [7] emphasizes the difference between information which characterizes as data, the news we are involved with and the knowledge which is the meaning we attribute to the information after processing, interpreting and understanding it. Therefore, the knowledge is something individual, constructed from each own's experiences.

With the insertion of the Information and Communication Technologies at the educational context there were changes at "the production and the dissemination of information and knowledge – specially the scientific and the technological" [2]. We agree with Lévy [5] when he points that there were changes in relation to the contents, the planning, the personalization, the curriculum organization, the speed of the information access, the role of the teacher, his profile, among other important aspects. The excerpt of a participant of an offered distance course at a private University illustrates this new way of information dissemination:

> The impact of the technology at the education is a wonderful thing to see, I can say that it is positive. I am from the time in which the encyclopedias were sold at the door of my house, where it was invested a lot of money for a good education, where we had enourmous libraries to keep all these volumes. An encyclopedia called "Delta Júnior" or "Delta Larousse" which before was used with care not to let the pages going out, or tear or scribble them, and it could be moved from one place to another in a small bag without any problem. Books which filled the shelves, today they became e-books and they are in Ipods, MP4 and computers. The democratization of the technology use is a gigantic step for the dissemination of the knowledge in all society. (Márcia)

The knowledge in itself is changing. It is deterritorializating [3]. It is detaching from the books and the libraries to meet themselves suspenseful at the virtual context. It is infiltrating the walls of the subjects curriculum becoming its limits indefinite. It is mining its margins and, so, breaking with its linearity. This deterritorialization is exemplified at the following excerpt:

At the academic life I only see improvement, therefore the information facilities we currently is not restricted to the libraries of old time or to the pre-formed conceptions of the teachers. Today, we have a lot of information which being well used can expand our academic horizons,such as bring the current reality to our lives at the University , giving us the opportunity to discuss routine themes with our educators and to make us acquire experience from any place of the planet. (Pedro)

Alarcão [1] states that we are from "the society of information" to "the society of learning", therefore, accordingly to her, if there is not an organization of the information, there is no knowledge. Kenski [4] states that it is necessary to be in permanent state of learning and adptation to the new. Lévy [5] characterizes how the learning should occur and gives the name of "Open and Distance Larning". At this context, the learning occurs through a new "pedagogy" which favors at the same time the personal learners and the net cooperative learning.

## 2. New relations with the knowledge

Accordingly to Lévy, the individuals learn each time more outside the academic rows, therefore, the educational institutions cannot ignore the acquired knowledge at the social and professional life and they must develop procedures of recognition of this knowledge.

The possibility to sail at the information ocean and to have the acessible knowledge through the internet is very large, with educative programmes and simulation systems which permit the learners to familiarize, at a low cost, with the objects and the complex phenomenon. This access to different subjects is exemplified at the following excerpts:

The amplitude of the technology and the facility and speed we have the information is very fascinating. We can go through ways we have never imagined before, travel the trip of the dreams, get closer to distant friends and make new ones, acquire great knowledge. (Carlos)

When you use the technology to make the good by pacific means it has its value.... at the academic life it is an excellent way for you

> to know several subjects related to politics, religion or your own life way... (Ana)

These modifications at the educational systems occurred by the informatic culture must base themselves at a transformational analysis of the relation with the knowledge, which can call the attention to three preliminary assumptions [5]: the speed of the knowledge appearance and renovation in general, in which, the majority part of the competences acquired by a person at the beginning of his professional path will be obsolete at the end of his career; the new nature of work in which to work becomes more and more to learn, to share and produce knowledges; the informatic devices give support to the intellectual technologies which amplify, exteriorize and change numerous human cognitive functions (memory, imagination, perception, reasoning).

In reason to the new relations with the knowledge presented we need to sharpen our curiosity and discover that the TICs do not terrify, just give us new direction and invite us to pass through places yet, maybe, not passed before. To Lévy, it is necessary to navigate in this world of radical transformations and to realize the knowledge discovery. This search for the knowledge is exemplified by Vanilda, a participant of a distance course:

> I, particularly as a digital student, try to strengthen and to follow the course. I am studying at this modality for the first time and I confess that it has already opened new horizons for me, It has already given me incentive to research, to read, habits which I did not have yet. I am sure that I will make an effort and I will conclude this course with success. (Vanilda)

Based on these presuppositions, we notice two principles which can be recognized as basic principles to the learning mediated by the TICs or the learning by distance education: the autonomy and the cooperation.

## 3. Autonomy to learn or learn to have autonomy?

In the research we are developing in a Superior Education Private Institution, with students from distance graduation courses, it was already possible to identify some of their conceptions about learning at this modality, like the following excerpt exemplifies:

> Today, the technology helps me even in my studies. I can do my superior course without leaving my family absent, work and the most important,be autodidact. (Débora)

Autodidactism differs from autonomy. Autodidact refers to someone who is able to teach himself. Autonomous is someone protagonist of his own learning. Autonomy goes beyond than learning alone. It is understood as someone who is autonomous with freedom to go and come. Someone able to reflect about the consequences of his own decisions.

Paulo Freire [3] has already talked about autonomy as one of the teaching pillars, independent of the modality it is part of. But, even at the distance education, this autonomy presents itself as primordial.The student must have the capacity to discern btween the valid information and the invalid one, he must question what is offered to him as truth, he must reflect and establish links to go beyond the rough data and arrive at the level of the apprehended and pertinent knowledge [1], acoordinlgy to the following excerpts:

> The student will have to leave the state of laziness, he will have to make an effort , to be interested at the maximum, though he will be the greatest responsible for his profit at the studies. He will not receive the things as he used to, everything solved.(Nadir)

> I have also to be accustomed not to getting the information ready to use. (Marcelo)

If the student is not autonomous to learn, it is an obligation of the teaching organize the learning situations in a way to take the student to reflect and establish connections. "Teaching is not transfer knowledge" [2].

As a prerequisite or a consequence, the autonomy is one of the pillars which bases the learning in any context, bu mainly at the distance education, accordingly to the following excerpt?

Such as the presential teaching, the student at the distance education will depend on himself to get his objective, the learning. For this, at the distance education, the student will have to be a little more disciplined not to be overflowed with the stablished activities. (Carlos Alberto)

## 4. Collaborative Learning

When we see that the students have the conception they need to be autodidacts at the distance education, we perceive another point to be worked: the virtual being alone. Lévy deprives the characteristics of the supposing coldness at the cyberspace stating that "even when it does not follow any material meeting, the interaction at the cyberspace does not let of being a way of communication". The necessity of a physical contact, sometimes, does not base on little interaction at the online environment, but, for sure, it can be aggravated by it. What is clear in Lévy is that to have distance education it is necessary a personalised learning and a net learning. Therefore, the question of interaction is an important fact to work with, online or presential, accordingly to José's statement:

I see not just the distance education, but any current learning method a way of interaction among educators and learners. This interaction goes to take the change of experience and the relation will be bidirectional, getting an improvement to the process of learning and qualifying professionals to the restrained demands of the current market. (José)

Accordingly to Vygotsky [9] the knowledge is a product of social interaction and culture and in accordance to the author, the subject is conceived eminently as a social being and the knowledge as a social product. An important concept at Vygotsky's work relates to the importance of the relations and the integration with other people as origin of the learning processes and human development. For him, the social interaction has a fundamental role at the cognitive development. The educator is responsible to associate what the learner knows to a cultured or scientific language to enlarge his knowledge, in a way to integrate himself historic

and socially in the world, or at least, integrate himself intellectually in his vital space.

This proposal of integration can be developed by means of learning collaborative virtual environments, shared spaces of living which give support to the construction, insertion and changes of information by the participants aiming at the social construction of the knowledge, even to the individual or group work, in a way to contribute to the process of learning in general. The integration among presential and distance eduction is punctuated at the following excerpt:

> I believe that the distance teaching which is being more well spread in Brazil at the last years has a possibility of unimaginable success, in some years the presential faculties will have the necessity to search for experiences in the models at the distance education, as well as I believe that in the future there will not have distinction between presential and distance education, therefore with the adequation of the models we will have a method of teaching unified. (Fernando)

By means of groups or communities (Vygotsky), the students will have great possibilities of changes and negotiations. One showing the other in what and why believes in some concepts, and the other agreeing or disagreeing makes that we think about the object in study and this takes to the learning. Accordingly to the following excerpt:

> The student who intends to do a new distance course will have to recycle, that is,  to adapt to the new teaching concepts, investigating and communicating not just to the teachers to take the doubts off but also to share his experiences with the colleagues. (José Antonio)

### Final considerations

The success of using the TICs at the distance education depends on the changing of focus. It is necessary to favor an educational process which foments an intensive interactive and collaborative participation of the students.

The autonomy and the collaborative learning at the distance education will be able to be reference to the new learner who is able to transpose from the information society to the learning society.

There is much to study, produce, experience at this challengeable field of the distance education yet. Today, more and more, it is demanded professionals and citizens able to work in groups, interacting in real or virtual groups.

More than an "autodidact subject", the society today requires a subject who knows to contribute to the group learning which he belongs to, teaching, mobilizing, answering or asking. This is the collective inteligence of the group which is desired to put in function, the combination of the distributed abilities among its integrant people, more than the geniality of only one.

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[i] The excerpts were transcribed without any alteration and the names of the students are fictitious in the sense of maintaining the anonymity of the course participants.

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