



Artigo

PEDAGOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS: NOTES ON HIGHER LEVEL DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study emerged from my reflections and experience as a lecturer in undergraduate and graduate programs at the Open University of Brazil in partnership with the Center West State University in Guarapuava in 2014 and 2015. Through an integrative literature review, we sought to question the pedagogical assumptions in distance higher education. To systematize the notes, they were organized to explain the virtual environment, understand students' particularities in this context, and reflect on teaching practices considering these characteristics. Once we had identified the assumptions regarding the potential of technology as time and space relationships and enhanced reading comprehension through reframing, we were able to see their bond in autonomy. Jointly-created autonomy which, from the standpoint of participating in collaborative environments, is the entire prospect of distance education.

Keywords: Distance education. Teaching assumptions. Higher education.

RESUMEN

Este estudio surgió de las reflexiones y la experiencia como docente en la asignatura de Educación a Distancia y Métodos de Autoaprendizaje en la Enseñanza de Grado y Posgrado en la Universidade Aberta do Brasil, en alianza con la Universidade Estadual do Centro Oeste, en el municipio de Guarapuava, durante los años 2014 y 2015. Por medio de una revisión bibliográfica integradora, se ha buscado discutir los supuestos pedagógicos en la enseñanza superior en Educación a Distancia. A los efectos de sistematización, las anotaciones fueron organizadas de modo a explicitar el ambiente virtual, comprender las especificidades del alumno en ese contexto y reflexionar sobre la enseñanza antes esas especificidades. Identificados los supuestos en las potencialidades de la tecnología como las relaciones de tiempo y espacio y de ampliación de la comprensión de lectura por la resignificación, fue posible notar su relación con la autonomía. Una autonomía generada en la colectividad y que, por el enfoque de participación en los ambientes colaborativos, representa todo el prospecto de la Educación a Distancia.

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Palabras clave: Enseñanza a Distancia. Supuesto pedagógico. Enseñanza Superior.

RESUMO

O presente estudo surgiu a partir de reflexões e da experiência como docente na disciplina de Educação a Distância e Métodos de Autoaprendizagem no Ensino de Graduação e Pós-Graduação na Universidade Aberta do Brasil em parceria com a Universidade Estadual do Centro Oeste no município de Guarapuava, durante os anos de 2014 e 2015. Através de uma revisão bibliográfica integrativa, buscou-se problematizar os pressupostos pedagógicos no ensino superior na Educação a Distância. Para sistematização, os apontamentos foram organizados de modo a explicitar o ambiente virtual, compreender as especificidades do aluno nesse contexto e refletir sobre o ensino diante dessas particularidades. Identificados os pressupostos nas potencialidades da tecnologia, como as relações de tempo e espaço e de ampliação da compreensão de leitura pela ressignificação, foi possível perceber seu liame com a autonomia. Uma autonomia gerada na coletividade e que, pelo enfoque de participação nos ambientes colaborativos, representa todo o prospecto da Educação a Distância.

Palavras-chave: Ensino a Distância. Pressuposto pedagógico. Ensino Superior.

1. INTRODUCTION

Distance higher education has significantly expanded in Brazil in the past few years. Likewise, many authors have been discussing the teaching practices developed based on technological resources. Pursuing similar education goals but employing methods and classrooms that differ from face-to-face learning, lessons in virtual environments are challenges found in the information society. Therefore, by bringing this discussion to the fore, our purpose is to examine the relationship between higher education teaching requisites and the technological possibilities found in distance education.

This approach was chosen based on considerations and experience as a lecturer in the course on Distance Education and Self-learning Methods in Undergraduate and Graduate Education at Universidade Aberta do Brasil, in collaboration with Universidade Estadual do Centro Oeste in the city of Guarapuava in 2014 and 2015. The study was conducted based on an integrative literature review that singled out Distance Higher Education as the scenario to be investigated. Information was selected and defined as we looked into the studies discussed throughout the course, including Amarilla Filho (2011), Barros (2011), and Moran (2000); and authors referenced after the end of said course as product of complementary studies such as Santos (2010), Sobral (2010), Temperino (2006), and others. These were analyzed because they expertly explain the concepts which proved to have gaps.

To systematize our notes, our examination was organized based on three concepts: virtual environments, distance education students, and teaching in virtual scenarios. The criteria are justified by the task of explaining virtual environments as we look into the role of lecturers and their contribution to student autonomy, understanding the particularities of students in this context and the elements that facilitate learning, and finally, reflecting about teaching given these particularities. From such standpoint, distance education teaching requisites stem from the challenges and obstacles in the way of teaching and learning, as technological media are used to boost the meaningful internalization of knowledge.

2. THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

The virtual environment arranged as a learning space is permeated by discourses grounded on the democratization and accessibility of education, but it is also packed with many obstacles and challenges. Information and communication technologies have spread out, reinforced by social media, and

incorporated entertainment-oriented daily practices. Such complexity has brought the virtual and the physical closer together. In education, however, the resistance stems from claims regarding the breach in the teacher-student relationship, student isolation, and consequently, self-learning. Another mistaken notion equates autonomy and self-learning, which are different education concepts.

In that regard, we ask what is lecturers' role and how can they contribute to student autonomy in a virtual environment, whose characteristics are so different from face-to-face learning? First of all, we need to conceptualize the virtual environment as a space of teaching possibilities, given its particularities. Oliveira (2008) says the teaching process in distance education is characterized and exemplified by mediations identified by

[...] a computer connected to the internet and the use of virtual learning environments (technological mediation), adoption of interactive, collaborative teaching alternatives (didactic-pedagogical mediation), and lecturers' role (human mediation) to dynamize the experience of learning in a virtual environment (p. 189).

We also find, specifically in Federal Decree no. 2494/98 which regulates article 80 of the Brazilian Law of Education Guidelines and Bases, article one, distance education defined as:

[...] a manner of teaching that enables self-learning mediated by educational resources systematically organized, presented on different information supports, used either independently or jointly, and run by the various communication outlets (BRASIL, 1998). Conforme a autora e o trecho da legislação acima, os recursos didáticos disponibilizados virtualmente, chamados de mediação didático-pedagógica, geram expectativas para o desenvolvimento da autonomia do aluno,

intitulando-a, na lei, como autoaprendizagem. Porém, entende-se ainda que a aprendizagem está pautada na relação humana, não somente na tecnológica. Em consideração a esta mediação humana, professores, tutores e colegas envolvem-se numa prática reconhecidamente diferente das salas de aulas físicas.

The author's notes and legal provisions indicate that virtually provided education resources, called didactic-pedagogical mediation, create expectations for the development of student autonomy, which the law refers to as self-learning. However, we also believe learning is based on the human relationship instead of solely on the technology-based one. Considering this human mediation, lecturers, tutors, and students engage in practices which are notably different from those in brick-and-mortar classrooms.

Technological mediation makes it possible to shorten distances and consequently brings up another understanding of temporality. However, it does not do away with the human need to socialize. A few examples, already mentioned, are social media and virtual learning communities, which make it possible to connect with other people or study groups from across the world. Therefore, the technological apparatus is a scenario where teaching and learning possibilities and potentials are created, meaning they are lecturer-driven conditions to build knowledge. We must also understand that, despite these conditions, in distance education students have much greater challenges to overcome. One of them is the dichotomy between time and performance.

Amarilla Filho (2011) says "conventional" time is the actual time correlated to organizing teaching and learning stages and the dedication to the activities carried out. In short, the time when education is taking place. However, distance education also has the dimension related to temporal space, a relationship which tends to become increasingly

faster after people become familiar with the virtual learning environment. Not because teaching and learning speed up but because this tool makes it easier to choose how to organize one's own manner of learning. This time requires understanding the virtual space, also known as cyberspace, "which tears down the limits of communication and encompasses a continuous, permanent dimension of exchanges, assimilations, and deconstructions of cultural elements, [...] is the integrated media's field of immersion" (SOBRAL, 2010, p.7).

Oliveira (2008) teaches us that in cyberspace, the "concept of presentiality" changes to the extent in which technologies make it possible to shorten distances and integrate various learning spaces. Similarly, the concept of lesson changes and incorporates other characters beyond lecturers and students at school.

The Virtual Learning Environment, also called VLE by its users, is one of the spaces for studying and referred to as such to "designate any relationship mediated or enhanced by technology as a product of mental constructs externalized in cyberspace" (OLIVEIRA, 2008, p. 194). In this environment, the author distinguishes two education approaches: the conservative and the emerging. While the conservative is based on merely relaying information to be memorized and repeated when written tests are taken, lectures are recorded, and study books are arranged in text form, the emerging allows for people to interact in a way that the teaching learning process is mutual and collective, and dialogue is at the core of the approach.

The role of lecturers as the single holders of knowledge gives way to the mediator lecturer in the emerging approach. Lecturers have the specific task of mediating knowledge and technology, taking on duties such as

[...] formulating problems, provoking questions, coordinating work teams,

and systematizing experiences. In short, they play the role of academic advisors (OLIVEIRA, 2008, p. 197).

Given the unique classroom characteristics, revised concept of lessons, and different lecturer student relationship, it is clear that methods cannot be the same as those used in face-to-face lessons. Lessons need to be leveraging and aggregating, with actions that make each learning stage visible and drive the pursuit of new knowledge.

In this backdrop, students oftentimes find themselves in an education space unlike any other they have experienced. Seeing themselves in this space as autonomous subjects is very important. However, this is not the only aspect capable of characterizing students in the virtual space. In view of that, next we are going to discuss the following particularities that may interfere in distance education students' learning.

3. THE DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENT

Although it is a fact DE is correlated to technological media, not all students enrolling in it have an easy time using this tools. In this case, preparation during the immersion in this technology is the first step. One needs to step into the virtual students' shoes and understand the responsibilities, possibilities, and limits they will find.

Students are going to face several challenges: they will need to learn about the tools and understand what the environment can contribute to make sure their learning is meaningful. This requirement will be constantly pointing to the dialectic issue brought up by distance education. Aspects such as distance and proximity, learning and teaching, virtual time and real time, construction and deconstruction, in short, concepts which at times take on very different meanings in virtual space and which are valued based on how

they are needed as tools given the knowledge building possibilities.

Students also need to understand that learning spaces are about more than just the education platforms. Oftentimes these platforms will take them to other related texts, videos, images or audios allowing students to view contents that will help them look further into, complement, or diversify the contents. This multiple viewing is called hypertext which, according to Santos *et al* (2010), is that which breaks with the linearity of ordinary texts and transcends knowledge by providing links to other textual planes. Electronic texts make it possible to tear down textual plane limits very easily through technology and foster connections which would otherwise be impossible through other physical materials, or as fast. Malaggi, Marcon, and Teixeira (2012) tell us that:

By “navigating” the structure of a hypertext, we find that links make connections through some expression, phrases or words that lead readers to other pieces of information. In turn, these pieces may contain many other links which thus make up an information mesh that can be accessed in many ways and from several directions, depending on readers’ intent, their purposes (p.155).

This notion that the task of learning in a virtual environment is not a static, least of all isolated, action is paramount. Therefore, students must clearly understand the goals and intentions set down in the study plan and what education processes are about. This is a condition that boosts students’ autonomy and their leading role in pursuing their own learning (OLIVEIRA, 2008).

Knowledge is built gradually as contents are examined. These instances include initial, in-depth, and supplementary readings, audios, texts, video classes, films, forums, and chat rooms, among other things. In this

educational backdrop, we should reassess the concept of reading considering the particularities of higher education.

Rosa (2014) says reading is more than merely decoding the written code. It allows people to combine knowledge, recognize society through its take on the world, think, and question things by setting up a dialogue between text and reader. Even though it is one of the main skills required from students, many of them “upon enrolling in higher education, have shown to have trouble with and disregard for reading-related activities” (REZENDE *apud* ROSA, 2014, p. 14).

Difficulty and lack of interest put up barriers against learning. The inability to understand what one is reading means readers are unequipped to perform in-depth analyses and hardly able to be critical. In distance education, developing reading comprehension of academic contents is essential for activating prior knowledge, contextualizing, looking deeper into, and working over the topic, thus contributing to the collaborative environment. Rosa (2014) highlights that

[...] reading becomes necessary for studying, looking for information, researching, and other tasks, where one action complements the other, which is complemented by a third, i.e. how each person sees the world. That is because reading allows people to expand their knowledge and converse with the text, whether it is represented by letters, sounds, colors, images etc. (p. 22).

The author points out non-verbal language is an expansion of the learning process. Watching movies, listening to music, or analyzing info-charts makes it possible to build meanings and decode information just as much as written text does. We should also mention the reading of different text genres, which drive readers to creating increasingly more complex comprehension strategies.

The different readings are based on a dialogic process. Moran (2000, p. 23) teaches us that “we learn when we build bridges between thinking and doing, between experience and concepts, between theory and practice; when both feed each other.” This characteristic refers to the resignification of the content.

Resignifying means deconstructing and reconstructing concepts, and it happens “[...] when we find new dimensions of meaning which had previously eluded us, when we gradually expand the circle of understanding what is around us” (MORAN, p. 23). Resignification breaks down and rewrites the teaching learning process in technology-based education, which gives people the chance to think about study practices not as some isolated action by students as they learn or lecturers as they teach but as an interaction brokered by media. It is imperative to understand that these technological devices do not replace lecturers in this type of education.

In fact, resignification also refers to remodeling study proposals and spaces which are part of working within the cyber culture. Hence, although the communication environments are different, dialogue remains a part of the process and requires interaction in order for knowledge and experiences to be shared. Participation, understood to be collaborative, is one of the distance education pillars given the concept of interactivity.

Nova and Alves (2003) say interactivity is a word that defines the reciprocal action of exchanging communication. However, such exchanges may be “provoked” at all times by the activities proposed. Interactivity requires active participation and interventions from several types of users, namely classmates, professors, and tutors, who operate under different conditions. By understanding the meaning of collectivity, we find that:

They (users) would be given the possibility of remodeling, resignifying, and

transforming the product with which they were interacting, according to their imagination, need or wish [...]. That opens up greater opportunities for discourses to become more open and fluid, which would considerably reduce the barriers and distances existing in the communication process between senders and receivers without, while doing so, causing the producing agents to lose their singularity. It is the very writing on the world, mixed up with the reading thereof, which tends to become collective and anonymous (NOVA and ALVES, 2003, p.11).

The authors also say that interactivity in distance education is about expanding the collectivity of knowledge produced from this exchange of information sending and receiving. This non-linear production of knowledge conducted by media technology reveals a way of thinking that is significantly open to and flexible about the new insertions. Forums, chat rooms, and other spaces represent the construction of two-way communication where sender and receiver continuously trade places and make up a knowledge network to which everyone contributes.

That fact that people can display their work on the internet get feedback on it; collaboratively put together texts, take part in virtual communities allowing them to participate according to their topics of interest, have virtual discussions, communicate instantly, post individually and collectively, [...] makes it possible [...] to present an integration proposal boosted by the various available devices (BARROS and CARVALHO, 2011, p.213).

The issue is that, in distance education, the connections must take place so that teaching and learning may take place as well. In that regard, there is a deep bond between interaction, interactivity, and learning. They are overlapping actions that must be fed by the prospect of new ways of knowledge. It is

essential for learning that this desire for knowledge is nurtured, as it is an aspect tied to self-motivation.

Self-motivation refers to the will to learn, to intervene in one's own learning. Moran (2000) highlights that learning takes interest, which is linked to necessity. Learning needs meaning, goals, or usefulness. Distance education requires following principles that cannot be simply conducted by professors or tutors. It is extremely necessary that students take such initiative and feed it every time they come across an obstacle, as another element of learning. Self-motivation refers to boosting interest, a safety measure to ensure it is not lost along the road to education.

Discipline is another important aspect in distance education. Discipline encompasses many factors such as, for instance, organizing one's time to participate in collective and individual activities proposed and available in the virtual space. Managing time is essential for structuring one's learning, setting one's own pace, and setting goals for each phase. After all, time is a word which, much like distance, corresponds to several concepts in distance education. According to Teperino (2006), this condition is a learning characteristic of adult students, and in that sense,

[...] their motivation for studying is spontaneous, intense, and persistent; it has clear, concrete goals; they wish to be successful, and therefore are highly result-oriented, meaning they cannot afford to fail or waste time; they are sensitive to criticism; they have a sense of responsibility to their own conscience [...]; they are more likely to experience work-derived fatigue; they have previous knowledge and experiences that may be positive, [...] they are after practical consequences for their goals, which in general makes them more dedicated to their studies (p. 41).

All of the aspects mentioned above, i.e. interactivity, discipline, motivation to learn, and an understanding of cyberspace, are traits required to develop autonomy. Araújo and Carvalho (2011) say that autonomy refers to "students' acting as subjects of their learning" (p. 186). In this case, being autonomous is not a moment but a stance which will materialize while studying and manifest itself several times through the activities presented, concepts built and their new meaning, search for new knowledge, ability to easily handle technology-based procedures, use or exemplification of knowledge and hands-on situations, and participation in collective activities. Although the concept of autonomy in distance education is

[...] directly linked to the fact that students can study online without necessarily having the physical presence of a professor. [...] it should be noted that activities which are autonomously carried out in DE have been devised, planned, systematized, and provided by one or several professors (ARAÚJO and CARVALHO, 2011, p.186).

In turn, professors depend on students' dedication so the formers' methods and approaches can materialize into learning. This "two-way" intervention condition is directed at the aspect of collaborative learning, a potential attributed to the characteristics of cooperation and creativity in the production of virtually connected knowledge. "Interactivity, the possibilities of navigating the web, and the dialogue that can be had are the basic conditions for establishing autonomy" (SERAFINI, 2012, p. 73).

The construction of autonomy is embedded in the stance of an aspect treated as a new education concept, proactivity. According to Aguiar, Ferreira, and Garcia (2010), proactivity includes readiness, anticipation, perspicacity, a sense of urgency, initiative, agility, responsibility, and consistency. Proactive

students contact their professor and tutor and surround themselves with other sources of knowledge, that is, they do not allow their questions to go unanswered. Proactivity is tightly connected with student participation, albeit not restricted to it. Instead, it expands the possibilities when it is developed by tutor and professor who, in the collaborative environment and through dialogue, enable a more consistent education. This strengthening of the interactivity network makes it easier to solve the problems students may come across because collective aid allows learning to be more achieved more autonomously. However, proactivity conditions the search of answer-finding mechanisms, reduces difficulties, and provides a more in-depth view of one's own learning.

Hence, the facilitating elements define learning through distance education and point out the possibilities of organizing one's studies and setting the goals to be gradually reached. Proactivity is about being aware of the importance of understanding the ontological characteristics mentioned in the approaches; conceptualize or re-conceptualize the items proposed, and be mindful of the different presentation layouts, in addition to dedicating themselves to interacting in the network participation spaces. In short, it describes the necessary characteristics that must be developed for learning in this backdrop.

4. TEACHING IN THE VIRTUAL SCENARIO

The approach to teaching is looked into separately in this study merely as a way of systematizing the discussions about the main topic. Teaching and learning are part of the same process, and our purpose is to understand the challenges and hurdles teachers face to carry out such process.

It should be kept in mind this scenario is about technology-mediated higher education. With respect to that, Romiszowski *apud*

Oliveira (2008) highlights that most teaching activities in face-to-face education, or "conventional" education as the author calls it, already make use of some online medium, either study materials sent via email or located on a website. Therefore, including technology-based mediation in education is oftentimes a partially developed task. However, the characteristics of teaching change when technologies are one of the main axes of mediation. Teaching strategies must be different and a few concepts changed. One of them is the concept of lesson.

The virtual lesson concept is based on a practice built on the concepts of innovation, flexibility, and dialogue, in addition to being enhanced by the speed and shortened distances offered by technological mediation. Once dialogue is made easier, it is possible to more accurately diagnose what students have either understood or not. Such dialogue may be synchronous via chat rooms and web conferences, or asynchronous via texting, emails, and discussion forums. Another important aspect of technology-mediated dialogue is the fact that all instructions are recorded, and therefore can be accessed at any time by students or teachers. Lessons are not restricted to their 50 minutes and can be accessed at different times throughout the day on any day of the week.

The contents proposed unfold into new findings which would not be possible in a face-to-face lesson given time constraints. Through what Oliveira (2008) calls 'making up for the absence', the search for new knowledge takes place when teachers encourage students to participate, work, and develop their autonomy.

In that regard, one of teachers' main duties regarding online lessons is the preparation and arrangement of study materials in the virtual environment. The learning space must be familiar to students in order for interactivity to be enabled. Once the organization of the platform design has been adapted, students need

to find in their lecturer's language the goal for each content, each study procedure, and even the evaluation criteria (OLIVEIRA, 2008).

To do that, students must also have developed their reading comprehension. Quaglia, Bonnici, and Paixão (2015) emphasize the importance of students training to be skilled readers, which must be encouraged by teachers. Research consistency is the product of investigation, interpretation, and critical thinking, which are only boosted by the habit of reading. Additionally, speaking in the collaborative environment results from knowledge acquired through reading, which knowledge is discussed and polishes people's understanding of and through different contexts, allowing them to take a stand through language.

Combined with the foregoing, teaching aimed at bringing about learning fosters discussions about the relevance of expanding dialogue in distance education, which ensures the quality of this practice. In this technological backdrop, our perspective is that the specificities are part of the framework that integrates and enhances the construction of knowledge.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Identifying the various learning and teaching facilitators in higher education mediated by technological elements was the common thread in this study. Interaction stood out as an education mediator as the collaborative environment and human mediation were singled out as the starting and finishing lines in terms of the preparation of materials and the activities planned.

Students' engagement in their own learning and contribution to the learning of other classmates was also found to be one of the pillars for building knowledge in virtual environments. Exploring the potentials of technology, such as time and space relationships and enhanced reading comprehension through

resignification, set in motion by discipline and motivation, are aspects that strengthen the knowledge-building process.

Nevertheless, autonomy is the link between all the education requisites pointed out. It holds the entire prospect of distance education. Collectively-generated autonomy, that is, autonomy of people with a sense of belonging. It is not merely about flexible study hours but instead of giving more room for students to play a leading role in education. The discourse of inclusion turns into integration, and discussions from the standpoint of innovation give way to building stronger relationships and solid knowledge based on new studies.

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