E-learning in an Institution of Elementary and High School Education: Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

If, in the past, distance education (DE) bore the stigma of low quality basic education and professional courses, today it generates heated debates around digital inclusion, particularly when DE incorporated digital resources, which are still inaccessible to the majority of the Brazilian population. In any case, making use of sophisticated resources or not, DE grew quantitatively and physically reaching a greater number of people and more distant places. Its use worldwide was improved at all levels of education. The target audience and the objectives determine the kind of instructional material to be offered. This paper intends to report the experience of an ongoing placement course of Musical Education, using computer and internet resources, for 7th grade students at a federal public school that offers elementary and high school education. This paper intends to contribute with research projects in the field of basic education.

Key words: elementary school education - distance education – virtual learning environment

INTRODUCTION

People responsible for the management of education and, certainly, all other Brazilian educators, unanimously regard as important the presence of children and young people at school. They are right, because the development of abstract capacities nurtured by the school environment as initial basic formation includes ethical and socio-cultural aspects present in the school curriculum. This development inserts in the information network contents linked to social and interrelational issues. Statistics show negative effects in the overall development of a country when it is not possible to share a school environment. On the other hand, it is recognized that the education today is not centralized and that all environments are important channels in the general upbringing of the citizen. Contemporary challenges in the world today demand technical and practical knowledge about a society which the classroom projects beyond its walls, whenever possible, with the use of the World Wide Web. The formation has been expanded, overcoming geographical spaces and the regular school periods.

In this context, the school needs to encourage and mediate the access to the information and the means to it and, according to the socio-cognitive limitations of the students, it may also rely on the strategies for distance education, as stated in article 32, § 4 of the LDB/ 96 (the Brazilian federal legislation for education):

> §4: "The *ensino fundamental* (elementary school) will be offered on-site and distance education may be used as a complement in the learning process or in emergency situations." The law insists on on-site learning to encourage socio-psychological and pedagogical aspects in the development of children and adolescents. There are two possibilities that allow the adoption of distance education:
> a) Complementation of learning (to enrich and to deepen the curriculum, to recover and to accelerate the studies of students who are older than the age limit for each grade, among others. See also the article 24, item V, of the LDB in Portuguese:
>   http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/LEIS/L9394.htm);
> b) Emergency situations, such as temporary lack of teachers, children and adolescents who need to stay in hospital or those who are living with their parents abroad and would not be taught Portuguese otherwise.

Based on such premises, it is proposed a distance placement course in Musical Education to assist new students at a public federal school that offers on-site classes of Musical Education for students since the early years of elementary school. New students are admitted to 7th grade after taking an entrance examination. These new students, however, did not have Musical Education classes in the curriculum of their previous school. Therefore, they have a significant lack of contents in comparison with those who have studied with us since elementary school. The option for a distance program took into account the fact that students are allocated to different branches of the school, and students themselves have different availabilities of time, besides the fact that each branch does not have enough Musical Education teachers to offer extra on-site support classes.

Santos[9] adds that in the development of a planned learning environment with techno-electronic resources it is important to consider the probable impact on the clientele.

In this perspective, it is expected that, at the end of the course, students will have acquired some elements besides the Musical Education contents: the ability to use (well) computer resources and the development of their autonomy in relation to their own intellectual growth.

Since distance education is a pioneering activity to improve the teaching and learning of Musical Education in this school, using the technology of e-communication, it is part of the objectives of this course [5] [6]:

- To motivate and validate educational innovation;
- To provide significative evidence of how to define and redefine the tasks.
- To confirm that all objectives set for the course are being accomplished, and that the strategies chosen for the course are efficient and efficacious;
- To check if there was acquisition of contents and change of attitude; development of creativity; ability to relate to others.

In distance education, the didactic triangle – teacher, student and knowledge – does not affect people only, but collective agents who, in the virtual relations, go through an organization of time and space, habits, work and communication rules. From this, rises an active, cooperative and differentiated pedagogy that needs to rely on an instructed and attentive coordination that has to be willing to change, if necessary. The report by Gouveia & Bizzo to the

Câmara de Educação Básica/CNE [Chamber of Elementary Education] [4] reaffirms that:

> "learning, made possible by the means of communication, does not take place without a close relationship among the various participants of the process, highlighting that the participation and the interaction among students and among students, teachers and the technologies employed are essential both to on-site education and to distance education as well."

The public school discussed here has accumulated, for over two decades, positive experiences in the use of computers in education and, like those, the virtual placement course also encompasses the question of the digital inclusion of students who are socially heterogeneous. Our previous experiences with our former students, raising their awareness that the computer and the Internet are important means to access information and knowledge, motivate our team to continue doing more.

PEDAGOGICAL TEAM

As a matter of fact, one of the authors of this article received the request for a course, or even extracurricular classes, from the Musical Education Department of the institution. Her initial area of expertise is Musical Education and she collaborates with the Educational Computing initiatives since they were introduced by the school. The other author is a specialist in Educational Computing and in Distance Learning. She is a member of the group that introduced Educational Computing in the institution and later joined the project described here. Interdisciplinarity is a predominant element in cooperative work, on-site or not. In this sense, coordination and tutorship are, in fact, as a team, convinced of the benefits of this exchange and this facilitates the conduction of the activities with teenage students.

Aretio [2] claims that there are many names for the teacher that assists the student and that the word "tutor" refers to the one that protects, initially employed to designate the person responsible for a minor. In open and distance education, this word is attributed to the teacher who supports the

isolated student, alone, who does not have the presence of a teacher. However, it is important to consider that, today, the image of the tutor has acquired another connotation, because a significative number of distance education courses has more efficient and interactive means of information and communication than a few years ago, redefining the roles and the tasks of the advisors in the application of the contents.

Aretio [1] also credits tutors with the success (or unsuccess) of a course, without dissociating it from the proposed structural conditions. According to him, despite his/ her area of expertise, the tutor does not necessarily have to be the author of the content, but responsible to advise the student. The tutor needs to be aware of the limits of his/her function and to clarify his/her role as a mediator, helping the participants to integrate with each other, reducing the sensation of isolation or anxiety, in face of the problems that often occur. The tutor needs to guide without centralizing in order to avoid being condescending, what often happens in the teacher-student relationship, particularly in the age range discussed here.

The tutor should develop the means of personal nature, such as the ethical principles of integrity, competence, honesty, responsibility for the people and for the overall well-being, as well as to establish an empathic relationship in the teaching-learning environment [3]. In this way, additionally to his/her attributions, it is recommended that the tutor possess some qualities, already discussed by Sanchez & Spruce [1] as being essential for a good educational practice, particularly distance learning, such as cordiality, maturity, emotional stability, social culture, self-confidence, acceptance and leadership.

In the case of the placement course in Musical Education, the coordinator is a specialist in the field and is knowledgeable about the subject and about the materials presented, for, recently, she digitally elaborated all the didactic materials of the course, so as to make them freely available on the Internet to all schools that had to incorporate, by force of law, the teaching of Musical Education in their curriculums. It is worth adding that the authors know very well the profile of the target public in elementary education, despite the fact that both authors do not work with them on-site. They accumulate the didactic practice of multicultural school projects on the web, developed in partnership with other schools in Brazil and abroad.

PEDAGOGICAL RESOURCES

Despite the lack of adequate funding for public schools in Brazil, Educational Computing resources are an exception, with laboratories and peripherals, including internet connection. Thus, students who do not have any resources at home may do the tasks of the course in their own school, preferably after their classes.

The need to complete the placement of the students in Musical Education in the period before the final tests of the first term hindered the preparation of a specific platform and the subsequent training of the users. So it was decided that the course, expected to last the whole academic year, would be developed, initially, as a Blog, respecting the preference and a usual reference among our target public. The Blog guides the students among the activities and the sources of research, while the study materials and the exercises are emailed to them.

In order to do the tasks, students can use the Musical Education Portal, mentioned above, which displays graphically a presentation of the course contents, exercises and musical practice, electronic handouts, among others. There is also the possibility to obtain the printed handouts at school, in case users find it difficult to read the materials online or cannot print them. Once the deadline for the activities is over, an answer key is posted on the Blog so students themselves can check their results. Doubts have to be posted on the Blog. Therefore, both the tutor and the students can collaborate for a better understanding and a solution to the problem.

STUDENTS

Previous experiences have shown that most young people can use computer resources for entertainment and synchronous communication. Most are highly skilled in the use of electronic mail and chats, on the telephone or on the computer. However, they are not familiarized with forums or other posting tools. This did not worry the pedagogical team, for it is an essential characteristic of the adolescent learner to be (or to become) pro-active, as it is expected from any learner in distance education. [7][8].

Apart from exceptions, specified in law, the Brazilian youth are accustomed to the on-site study model. The virtual environment brings them a different perspective of the traditional classroom. Students have to be open to this new learning concept. In distance education, first of all, the student needs to be willing to learn. Only based on this premise, s/he will take the control and the responsibility for his/ her learning. This may seem obvious, but it is not. Curiously, the student, whether young or old, adopts the same attitude, relying on the determinations and limits established by the teacher, for example, accumulating his tasks until the day before the deadline, copying other people's work to hand in as research, if s/he has the chance, and so on. The student transfers the responsibility that should have been his/hers, as a learner, to someone else:

> 1st Art. "Distance education is a modality of education that enables self-teaching, with the mediation of didactic resources systematically organized, presented in different information supports, used in isolation or combined, and broadcast by many means of communication." (DECRETO Nº 2.494, February 10, 1998. Available in Portuguese at: http://www.lei.adv.br/2494-98.htm)

Due to the dynamic of the virtual learning environment, still relatively unknown in the field of elementary education, it was necessary to promote a meeting with everyone involved in order to explain the proposal and to obtain the permission to participate in the course. After that, each student received an email informing the beginning of the course and an invitation to the Blog, previously prepared. Besides being a way to distribute materials, this email is a private channel between the staff of the course and the students, if they wish to contact us. The telephone of the Music Department is used for administrative issues.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The current work takes into account the theoretical presuppositions to put into practice a placement course in Musical Education for 7th grade elementary school students at a federal public school, using a virtual learning environment.

Undoubtedly, the computer permeates almost every segment in society and, strengthened by the world web, it is restructuring communications worldwide.

The contributions of distance learning online gather aspects that are not so observable in the on-site education network, at least not in such a broad scale, such as: to overcome the barrier space-time-group of students; to enable the use of the available internet tools to mediate the construction of new knowledge; to modify the role of teachers from transmitters of information to planners and managers of learning; to generate a new study culture.

Until this moment, the placement course in Musical Education in a virtual learning environment has been efficient as a complement to the on-site meetings. The distance learning system, with its own characteristics, has a number of resources available that may be immediately employed in continued learning and in the daily life of students. According to what has been mentioned above, the students in the course are expected to develop different skills in the art of leaning, which may be employed in other situations. Students should also be willing to learn, alone and in group, and have the stimulus to invest in the construction of new knowledge, to select information, etc.

The choice of distance education online to cater to the needs of the Musical Education Department comes from the idea to use one more technological possibility of computers in this elementary school. For a long time, Colégio Pedro II has supported the initiatives of the Educational Computing staff to create, in our laboratories, an environment capable of generating collective intelligence, cooperation, openness, discussion, construction, circulation of people and of knowledge.

Right now, we are observing how 7th grade students respond to a virtual learning environment, how they manage their time, how this strengthens their intellectual autonomy, their capacity to learn how to learn (always), their problem solving skills and their ability to create strategies.

Finally, being able to work with knowledge generating education is innovative; to consider the individual and the social/ cultural dimensions of the subjects involved in the situations of teaching and learning so as to plan adequate learning strategies. Innovative is when the teacher assumes a participative and reflexive attitude, abandoning the inflexible position of being

the sole possessor of knowledge. Innovative is to live in a society in which education is a right granted to everyone who attends an elementary school and who continues building his/her own path afterwards.

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