

CHAPTER 2

A DISTANCE EDUCATION ALTERNATIVE: WORK COMMUNITY/ONLINE LEARNING

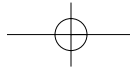
*An Alternative Distance Education is Possible: Network
Learning and Working Community (CTAR)*

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2.1 Introduction

The new denominations of distance learning – virtual education, electronic teaching or learning, e-learning, among others – are primarily characterized by the technologies themselves, the tools, the technical and operational issues – and these elements emerge as defining paradigms of the education systems and teaching and learning methods themselves. The focus of the discussions on the “new education” tends to be on the aspects dictated by global market laws, which seeks to justify a new and also globalized education market, which is not only possible but allegedly inevitable within the context of the current technological society. This is, in brief, the form of “sole vision” that intends to become hegemonic in the field of education, supported by the fascination of the new information and communication technologies. It is possible to notice the absence or at least the secondary role given to methodological issues concerning human subjects and to interpersonal relationships, usually mentioned more to attest and confirm the excellence of the technology or programs and less as central features of a person-centered rather than a technology or means-centered education.

The relation between distance education and the technologies and means of communication – essential for carrying out education at a distance, i.e. beyond the school grounds – is undeniable. However, this relation was not historically established as one of dependence or subordination to the means. In the origins of modern Distance Education (not considering the ancient forms of epistolar correspondence between masters and disciples), technology has always been associated with two main objectives: an alternative education, through the overcoming of geographical, spatial and temporal limitations; and the democratization of education as a public good, enabling the inclusion of those who are socially marginalized from the educational system in its conventional form. These principles remain fully valid in the current context of the new information and communication technologies. In the same way, the technical characteristics, the combination and the convergence of languages and means represent the possibility of expanding and deepening many essential aspects of the teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, they cannot be seen as paradigms imposed by the intrinsic nature of the technologies.



This chapter presents the experience of the CTAR group, from the School of Education of the University of Brasília, FE-UnB (Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de Brasília), during its 10 years of experience with distance education.

The concept of a Network Learning and Working Community – CTAR (Comunidade de Trabalho e Aprendizagem em Rede) – stemmed from pedagogical values and a range of teaching experiences which stress the possibility of a dialogue-based technological education instead of one based on the verticalized, asymmetric transmission of content and knowledge; the cooperative and collaborative action among the subjects instead of individualized competition; reflective work instead of the accumulation of information; the use of network communication for relationship building instead of isolation; and finally a distance education based on action that is transformative instead of reproductive. These are some of the ideas and practices which led to the claim that an alternative distance education is possible.

2.2 Historical Background

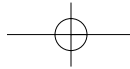
Distance education, based on different communication technologies, has been a reality in Brazil since the beginning of the radio era, but it has expanded in recent years, particularly after the enactment of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (*LDB, Lei 9394/96*). However, the current expansion still reflects a historical situation in which two trends coexist: one which responds to the market appeal of the industrial and commercial complex of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and another committed to pedagogical conceptions and educational practices linked to human development.

The University of Brasília (UnB) is known to be a pioneer in distance education initiatives in Brazilian higher education. Its original project already advocated, in 1961, the democratic and creative use of technologies in education. Committed to this innovative concept, the School of Education (FE) participated in several discussion forums and in the design and implementation of distance education policies in Brazil, particularly in the 1990s. In addition, it had a decisive participation in the design and implementation of the Brazilian Consortium of Distance Education – BRASILEAD, in 1994, which brought together a significant number of Brazilian public universities.

2.3 Building Institutional Competence in Distance Education

In the process of consolidating distance education in the Brazilian context, the FE developed the Third Specialization Course in Continued and Distance Education 1999/2000, aimed at building institutional competence for the development of distance education projects and the consolidation of this modality in Brazil. < www.fe.unb.br/ead-pos >.

This experience is an integral part of a training proposal initiated by the FE in 1994 with the consecutive offering of three courses, which led to the inclusion and use of ICT, resulting in the creation and consolidation of a Network Learning and Working Community – CTAR. During the First Course (1994/1996), a preliminary experiment on the use of network technology (Lotus Notes) and MINITEL was carried out, thanks to the support of OAVUP – University of Poitiers/French Embassy. It should be pointed out that there was no Internet access at the FE at that time. In the Second Course (1997/1998), with an Internet access already available and a local network set up, which included the laborato-



ry connected to a local web server, the FE for the first time experimented with a discussion forum.¹ This experience stimulated the development of an online hyper research with a group of students, thanks to Simon Fraser University, Canada, which made available its collaborative learning environment, Virtual-U. Thus, the initial conditions had been developed for Internet use as a mediator in the Third Course, enabling collaborative learning and network knowledge construction, focusing on the work thesis as an educative and creative principle.

2.4 The Network Learning and Working Community – CTAR

2.4.1 Conceptual basis

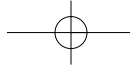
A group of 14 professors, mostly from the FE of UnB – identified in their educative praxis by the common influence of the political-pedagogical principles of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1997), by the constant defense of public education, and in different periods (since 1963) and degrees, by the accumulated experience with ICT, particularly in distance education –, were the authors of the concept of Network Learning and Working Community (CTAR), defined as: *“Open education, based on the pedagogy of autonomy, carried out in a network learning/working community, adequately using information and communication technologies.”*

Based on theoretical grounds previously selected, the CTAR group challenged itself in a continuous learning process of the possibilities and limits of ICT, put into use for the collective construction of knowledge among knowing subjects, aiming at the development of institutional competence combined with specialized qualification of teachers and other distance education professionals.

The theoretical underpinnings refer, mainly, to Paulo Freire’s (1997) proposal of “liberating education”, “pedagogy of autonomy,” “culture circle,” “dialogue between knowing individuals” who, deeply rooted in their culture, can recreate it. Other equally important complementary contributions include: Ubiratan D’Ambrosio (1997) on the role of education in the emergent “age of awareness”; René Barbier (1998) on the transversal approach to education, which, among other things, results in “sensitive listening”; Edgar Morin (1995) on the vision of totality, transdisciplinarity, and implication of subjectivity in the “epistemology of complexity”; Jacques Ardoino (1998) on “multireferenciality” in the understanding of the educative praxis; Pierre Lévy (1998) on the projection of the importance of education directed at human qualities in the “cosmopedia of the neolithic period”; Humberto Maturana (1995) on the biological bases of human understanding and the meaning of the singular creativity of “autopoiesis”; Manuel Castells (1999) on the understanding of the challenges posed by the network society; and finally the Delors/UNESCO Report (1996) expounding the four pillars of the educative society of the 21st century: “learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be”.

These underpinnings, preliminarily known or discovered through experience, still represent challenges to the consolidation of what has been proposed as *“an alternative distance education is possible.”* Such a concept implies the uniqueness of education mediated

1 This forum addressed the theme “The Age of Awareness”. The forum was held with the students and professor Ubiratan D’Ambrosio from UNICAMP and Universidade Virtual Latino-americana who was, at the time, a visiting professor in the Second Distance Education Course 1997-1998.



and non-mediated by ICT, in which the distance is attenuated by the necessary proximity among learners in the pedagogical interaction, where the subtle touch is complementary to the virtual touch. In the CTAR, face-to-face interaction is also a necessary condition for the proximity/distance between these individuals, as shown in the face-to-face meetings and in the discussion forums.

2.4.2 Technological options

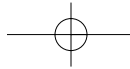
After analyses of previous experience, the group decided that the Third Course would focus on Internet mediated communication. So, through an intensive evaluation of the products available in the market, Virtual-U was selected. This software was provided by Simon Fraser University, Canada (and translated into Brazilian Portuguese by the team). The choice was based on its flexible and open structure, which provided the professionals who were responsible for the course with a rich and fruitful autonomy. The concept of distance learning, the adopted theoretical underpinnings, and the experience with the use of this software gradually allowed the team to acquire knowledge that enabled the development of a Database Academic Monitoring System as well as a free software aimed at the collaborative design of the Institutional Project – IP, the guiding principle of the Course and the final assignment. The development of this software represented an important technological choice for the design of this Project, once it was made available to the students, teachers, and tutors for both individual and collective development of their institutional projects for distance education training. Equally important were the forms of monitoring and evaluating the process provided by Virtual-U for teachers, tutors, and students, as well as the dialogues and exchange of knowledge among the actors.

2.4.3 Curriculum and target population

The proposal for an Institutional Intervention Project – a requirement for enrollment in the Program – was redesigned by the participants throughout the Course, with the theoretical and methodological support of the courses, which were organized into an integrated curricular structure comprising *Historical Foundations of Distance Education*, *Foundations of Communication and Learning*, *Research Methodology in Distance Education*, *Management of Distance Education Systems*, *Audio-visual Media in Distance Education*, and *Pedagogical Use of Online Interactive Technologies*. Two Face-to-face Meetings were held, as an integration and exchange strategy. The first, at the beginning of the course, in order to reflect upon the theoretical underpinnings, prepare the students to use Virtual-U, and carry out integrating activities; the second aimed at a partial assessment and the presentation and analysis of Institutional Projects.

The Third Course focused on adult workers committed to reviewing their training practices, taking into account the theoretical underpinnings currently in debate and the nature and role of ICTs. The target population consisted of 234 students, teachers, and other professionals involved in Distance Education programs coming from a wide range of institutions: *Public and Private Universities* (47%), *State and Municipal Education Departments* (15%), *Ministry of Education* (10%), *Public Bodies* (14%), *Companies* (10%), *Non-Governmental Organizations* (3%), and *Social Movements* (1%).

Due to the curricular organization of the Course, the profile of the public was characterized, at the moment of enrollment, according to their educational background and use



of the Internet. Participants were classified with regard to their educational background as *Graduates* (31%), *Specialists* (26%), *Masters* (32%), and *PhDs* (11%). With regard to Internet use, participants were classed as having *some use* – chats, video conferences, forums, e-mail, image and audio posting, and home page development – (88%) and *no use* (12%).

2.5 Management of Distance Education System

The training program, supported by the pedagogical use of ICTs, required a review and innovation of the management and organizational processes in order to make them compatible with the current changes in the contemporary world. The management system was based on democratic processes (Levy, 1998) and was developed within a network environment, interrelating technical, organizational and management innovations. The guiding principle was that the organizations should seek flexibility and adaptability, with a constant construction and reconstruction of culture as well as an overcoming of the traditional notions of space and time (Castells, 1997).

Thus, an open, flexible, and dialogical network was slowly being set up, linked to the pedagogical proposal, and organically integrated with the ICTs. This environment maximized the interaction conditions of the CTAR, fostering the development of shared action and learning. Tutoring was a fundamental element to the learning process, which was characterized by an intense dialogicity.

Such an environment composed of democratic management processes, founded on cooperation, characteristic of human lifestyle, based on trust and mutual respect, promoted an important shift in the learning focus. It also impacted on the self-sustainability of the team, consisting of professionals from diverse institutional backgrounds and from differing fields and levels of training, promoting a broadening of understanding, a valuing of competencies, creativity and innovation. The technological means were employed in such a way as to preserve the centrality of the process for the learners, though enabling the development of highly interactive relationships, free from the traditional asymmetries in the construction of knowledge.

The actors involved formed a multidisciplinary team of an intra- and inter-institutional nature, consisting of professors from the three departments of the FE, faculty members from other universities, and visiting professors from foreign universities (UNED/Spain and UA/Portugal), in addition to tutors and the technical-administrative support team. This dynamics of integrating the different actors amongst themselves and with the students enabled the development of the institutional and academic management competence of the Program.

It is important to point out that the implementation of this course relied on the valuable support of the UNESCO Chair in Distance Education of the FE/UnB and the international academic exchange, through a Cooperation Agreement with Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia – UNED/Spain, the support of Spanish Embassy – Spanish Agency for International Cooperation – AECI, and a partnership with Universidade Alberta – UA, Lisbon/Portugal. In addition to the participation of professors from these universities, the Course received the contributions of visiting professors from Simon Fraser University (Canada), Université de Poitiers - OAVUP and Université Paris VIII (French Embassy), and Universidade Virtual Latinoamericana.

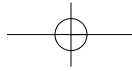
2.6 Results

Due to the academic recognition of its innovative nature, the Third Course has become an important field of research, which motivated the establishment of the ATEAD research group – Aprendizagem, Tecnologias e Educação a Distância (Learning, Technologies and Distance Education). This group, composed of participating faculty members, is registered in the Lattes System of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development of the Ministry of Science and Technology (Sistema Lattes do Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico – CNPq, do Ministério da Ciência e Tecnologia).

The results of this experience, and its repercussion in the consolidation of distance education in Brazil, may be evaluated by the breadth and diversity of the 58 institutions involved, located in the different regions of the Brazilian territory, as well as by the quality of the Institutional Projects developed. Most of these projects have already been implemented in the institutions, under the responsibility of the specialists who graduated in the Third Course. Some of these institutions are universities accredited by the Ministry of Education to offer distance education programs, in the same way as UnB itself.

The student's individual and group assessment and monitoring system was performed by combining observations and guidance for each activity inherent to a certain subject in the Virtual-U tool and in other records devised by the faculty members, and was primarily supported by the use of discussion forums (31 in the Virtual-U and one available for each IP) and secondarily through a chat included in this tool.

During the implementation of the CTAR Research Laboratory, activities were carried out which together represented significant contributions to the quality and advances in distance education: **a)** Use of the course management tool by the team and adaptation of the individual monitoring field with the inclusion of the profile of each student. The development of an Academic Monitoring System using a database and the development of a GPL (General Public License) open code software, freely available online for collaborative design of the Institutional Project; **b)** The production of 78 Web pages by students as an academic exercise; **c)** The production of a nationwide teleconference during the first face-to-face meeting; **d)** Production of a CD-ROM in the context of the Research Methodology in Distance Education course; **e)** The production of study guides, specific texts for the Course, and the translation of a book and an article, available on Virtual-U for the CTAR; **f)** The development of a methodology for holding face-to-face meetings and for the academic management of the CTAR; **g)** Support for the development of seven research studies on the Third Course: two of these for PhD programs in Education Sciences at UNED, Spain; four Master of Arts studies from Universidade Federal de Uberlândia; and one whose title was "*En quoi la téléprésence modifie-t-elle les relations de visu dans les dispositifs de formation bimodaux*" by a student from the DESS of the Faculté des Lettres et Langues da Université de Poitiers/France during her 60 day apprenticeship at the FE/UnB. There was also support for research in Ergonomics: "*A melhoria das condições de trabalho no Laboratório de Ensino Presencial, Pesquisa e Tutoria em Educação a Distância da FE da UnB*" (The Improvement of Working Conditions in the Face-to-Face Teaching, Research and Tutoring in Distance Education of the FE/UnB); **h)** The participation and support for the communication of the experience through exhibits, talks, and panels, with publications and participation in national and international distance education events as well as participation in a nationally-broadcast live TV program (TVE – Programa um Salto para o Futuro e TV SENAC).



2.7 Final Considerations

The results highlight the consolidation of the Pedagogical Proposal of the Network Learning and Working Community – CTAR, strengthening the theoretical underpinnings of the group and the claim that “an alternative distance education is possible.” The inquisitive attitude, through educative intentionality and the theoretical underpinnings of the CTAR group and ATEAD, created opportunities for interactivity and dialogue among professors, tutors, and students. It also contributed to the (re)signification and (re)construction of concepts, theories, principles, procedures, values, and attitudes, by unveiling the processes and their nature, the difficulties, the epistemological, attitudinal and valuative obstacles, in addition to the constant improvement of the educative process and of the technological environment of network learning and working.

Among the achievements of the team regarding educative issues and the relationship with the diverse subjects of the course, one line of action stands out as promising for the ICT mediated distance training processes: the overcoming of the view of the teacher as a mere performer of didactic routines, from the mere transmission of information to the careful construction of authorship, the committed dialogue supported by interactivity, in the dialogue and reflection from and about the practice, throughout the process, among all participants.

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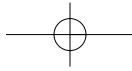
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