From professor to learner: reflections on professors' DL capacity-building

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ABSTRACT

The purpose is to report and to discuss the DL professors' capacity-building process, calling attention to an inversion of roles in this process, in which professors turn into learners, experiencing DL situations to understand and conduct them in their posterior teaching practice. Technology-Mediated Education, one of the program disciplines, was elaborated and offered in a problematizing perspective, in which professors, inserted in the course in a learner's position, could problematize, identify and experience day-to-day situations in DL learning. Four assessment instances were conducted at the end of the course: personal actuation, elaborated contents, learning experiences and web learning. *From the balance carried out, the experience was verified to be significantly more positive than those previously conducted, in which professors were received and guided to develop their DL activities, starting from their teaching role. The massive report by professors was that undergoing this experience, in this new format, allowed them to be able to view the professor's and the learner's process in a fuller and more effective way.*

Key words: Professors' Capacity-building; Distance Learning; Problematizing learning.

1 - Introduction

Before the economic, technological and scientific transformations Knowledge Society has been undergoing, the attention to the accumulated, generated and transferred knowledge increases more and more. This generates relevant consequences in the definition of educational policies and in the labor market, which today have knowledge as a competitive differential. In the educational ambit, educational tools are highly sought (ORTEGA, SANTIAGO, 2009) to aid education professionals in a number of activities involving educational experience knowledge (TARDIF, 2008). The use of alternative tools grows significantly, especially when approaching Distance Learning (DL), which privileges the advantages of technological resources associated to the teaching and learning processes. However, appropriating the skills involving the use of 'digital language', which was mentioned by Lévy (1993), is not such a simple task for teachers, especially to those belonging to the X Generation[1], in which the predominance of technicism directed teaching towards preparing individuals to perform roles, according to aptitudes, in a totally conventional model (BEHAR, 2009).

Thus, thinking of innovation in teachers' capacity-building in the Networked Society, which is guided by significant actions and in which teachers and learners learn together, exchanging experiences and, hence, building knowledge, a report on an experience of a DL program is presented herein, which innovated the capacity-building process when proposing differentiated ways of conceiving teacher and learner. For this, it was founded on a problematization methodology.

2 - The pedagogical language of teaching practice

It is an international consensus that teaching practice, be it in presential or in virtual environments, always has to be 're-invented' so as to meet the diversity in society followed by technological advances, and also to make the learning act 'appetizing'. This conception transcends the traditional teaching model, and is distinguished by the fundamental role of mediator and advisor performed by the teacher, or even multiple roles as a consequence of the dynamism of the profession (GIL, 2008).

For a long time, the teacher's role was admitted to be teaching, and possibly there are still people who agree with that. Nevertheless, there is not a consensus among education experts. If Carl Rogers's ideas are taken as a starting point, for example, the teacher's role will be verified not to be that of teaching, but of helping the learner to learn.

With the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in DL, other, newer, roles are required from these professionals who, while actuating, need constant support to improve their practice and, consequently, the teaching-learning process. Therefore, continuous formation is a way of conducting significant changes in educational practices and, consequently, as stated by Behar (2009), in the pedagogical model.

Fusari (1988 apud PIMENTA, 2005), concerning continuous formation programs, already stated that:

> show to have little efficacy to alter the teaching practice and, consequently, school failure situations, for not considering the school teaching and pedagogical practices in their contexts. When they are not used as the starting and ending points of formation, eventually they merely individually illustrate the teacher, not allowing him/her to articulate and to translate knew knowledge into new practices (p. 16) [free translation].

This situation, transferred to the higher education teaching context, is also relevant, as in the professors' capacity-building it is necessary to consider the 'errors' occurred, as from the teaching and pedagogical practice, from real situations, to identify the hindrances and to present solutions that can improve and to innovate, in a motivating environment for both teachers and, mainly, learners.

Great challenges are thus posed to teachers (especially to professors, to whom this work is directed) who have to develop competences, to have technical knowledge, to have a vision of the future, to be mediators, to be able to organize and to guide learning situations, to be transformers, multicultural, reflexive, open, capable of working in teams, to face duties and ethical dilemmas, along with being able to use new technologies (NÒVOA, 1991; GIROUX, 1997; STOER and CORTESÂO, 1999; PERRENOUD, 2000; MASETTO, 2003; GIL, 2008).

3 - The Institution and its Teaching Capacity-Building process in DL

The institution studied is composed of two *campi* located in different cities, and which historically conducts teaching capacity-building for the DL modality every six months. In capacity-building, great efforts were spent so that professors could significantly understand how a discipline in DL should be planned and conducted. In the first semester in 2010, the institution, as part of the program institutional teaching capacity-building, offered a specialization course in higher education teaching, in the DL modality. Following the specific guidelines for offering this modality, the course was started with a leveling discipline denominated "Technology-Mediated Education". The discipline seeks to meet the requirements imposed by the course authorization instruments (<http://www.inep.gov.br/download/superior/DL/Instrument_Autorizacao_course_DL.pdf>) and of course acknowledgement in the distance modality (<http://www.inep.gov.br/download/superior/DL/2010/instrument_reknowledge_course_distancia2.pdf>), which, notwithstanding being specific requirements for undergraduate courses, adequately meet DL projects in graduate courses, especially directed to those with no previous experience in the modality. For this reason, the discipline was inserted in the course. The expectation was that professors, playing the role of learners, could receive an initial formation in Distance Learning, and be familiarized, as learners, with the methodologies in the modality. With the success in this experience, the possibility of starting the teaching capacity-building process of the university mentioned with this leveling discipline started to be considered, and it was turned into an extension course.

4 - Research Characterization

With voluntary enrolment, the course reached a total of 18 enrolments, among which 9 were from Campus A and 9 from Campus B, coming from the exact, human and health areas. The course hour-load was 60 hours, with an average dedication of six hours a week, distributed along 10 weeks.

The methodology adopted in the course started from the premise of the Charles Maguerez's Arch Method, founded on an active problematizing learning process. As assessment criterion, two grades related to the learning process were adopted: a) continuous assessment (developed in virtual learning environment), and with a 40% weight; b) final presential assessment, with a 60% weight. The approval requirement was of a minimum of 70% acquisition.

The whole assessment process was founded on a theoretical variable denominated Rubric, in which the criteria for building the works and how they were to be assessed were listed. Besides helping learners to discover how their project would be assessed, the performance level expected was specified aiming at the several quality criteria. The lessons in the two *campi* were simultaneous, mediated by a webconference solution, with audio and video at both ends.

5 - Analysis and Discussion

At the end of the course, an assessment was carried out founded on four instances (Personal Actuation, Contents Elaborated, Learning Experiences and Web Learning). For each of the instances, affirmative questions were presented, which should be answered with a single alternative, distributed in a Likert scale. The scale used was: 0 - I fully disagree / 1 – I disagree / 2 - I neither agree nor disagree / 3 – I agree / 4 - I fully agree. Out of the 18 participants, 15 took the course fully (16.6% evasion). The three evaded learners justified their decision as excessive workload at that period. All the evaded learners were from Campus B.

Personal actuation assessment

When asked about their Personal Actuation in the course, it was possible to verify that the professors assessed their results critically.

	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
My motivation kept constant.	0	2	5	7	1
I managed to get organized for studying, conciliating the course works with those of other personal and professional activities I conduct	3	1	5	5	3
In my practical and organization conditions for the studies, the deadline stipulated for conducting the activities was enough.	1	2	2	3	7
I effectively participated in the individual activities proposed.	0	1	2	8	3
I contributed with my knowledge, ideas and experiences to the works developed in teams.	0	1	2	4	8
I explored the interactive potential of the virtual environment, sharing and discussing with the tutor and with the other colleagues.	0	1	3	7	4
The discussions and debates conducted in the virtual environment were relevant for my positioning towards the themes.	0	0	3	5	7
The readings suggested stimulated me to seek new references to	0	1	3	7	4

share with the team.					
Besides the essential reading indicated in each discipline, I had the opportunity to explore the other references listed	0	2	1	6	6
I feel apt to apply the knowledge built along this course in my work.	0	0	1	7	7

Table 1: Personal Actuation.

In the motivation item, 8 of them or 53.3% answered that they agree that their motivation kept constant along the course. For one-third of the group, 5 people, the result was indifferent, and for two people, this did not occur.

In this item, it was possible to compare the groups commitment within the discussion forums, which were more intense at the beginning of the course, and when carrying out the tasks, which, at the first stage, was developed by all, at the second stage by 86.6% of the group (13 people), at the third stage by 73.3% of the group (11 people). Concerning organization, only 20% of the group (3 people) reached the ideal situation, and another third of the group (5 people) reached a satisfactory condition. Practically half of the group reported not being able to get adequately organized for the course. When asked if the deadlines for conducting the activities were compatible with their organization for the study, 10 people (66.6%) considered they were.

The development of collective activities was more valued than individual activities. Whereas 8 people (53.3%) indicated to 'fully agree' that they participated in the collaborative activities, only 3 people (20%) used this rating for the individual activities.

The interactive potential of the AVA and the quality of the proposals generated by the course professors, associated to the learners' commitment, caused between 73.3% and 80% of the learners to make a positive assessment of their performance in this context.

As the course compulsory reading, the didactic material already built for the discipline Technology-Mediated Education was used. As an optional material, videos produced by the local TV Universitária were used, dealing with the subject and other relevant references were made available for web consulting. The great majority of learners, 80%, used the references indicated as optional and 73.3% mentioned to have developed researches as from the initial compulsory reading.

For the last Personal Actuation question, 93.3% of the learners considered to be able, as from the course taken, to apply the knowledge acquired in their disciplines.

Assessment of the contents elaborated for the course

Considering that the compulsory content for the course was the same presented to the undergraduate learners, our intention was to assess whether with the change in target-public, the contents would still be compatible with the intention of the DL insertion.

	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
Pertinent and updated. Through them, I could have a clear vision of the main subjects of the course	0	0	0	2	13
The degree of depth and comprehensiveness of the contents met my expectations	0	1	2	3	9
The language used was accessible and due to the colloquial register employed, I established an empathy with the material produced	0	0	0	7	8
The theoretical contents presented were enough for conducting the activities proposed collaboratively	0	0	0	2	13
The presential lessons content was significant to understand the studies proposed and carried out at a distance.	0	0	2	9	4

Table 2: Contents elaborated.

All the learners pointed out that the contents were adequate to the course, and 80% pointed out that it met their expectations as to comprehensiveness and depth. By means of the dialogic and mediational language of the material, 100% of the group reported empathy with the material produced.

A controversial datum referred to the sufficiency of the contents made available, for which 100% of the participants signaled positively. In a DL course, collaborative learning is intended to be made by the continuous increment of contents shared among the participants and this was a disheartening datum, seeing that, coming from professors, the research of new sources was expected to be paramount for any discussion level.

Presential lessons also represented an important content supply to the group, allowing for interaction and for building knowledge. Only 2 learners, or 13.3%, were indifferent to the practices presented in the presential lessons.

Learning Experiences Assessment (Academic Guide)

The learning experiences were specifically produced for this offer. The challenges proposed intended to lead the professors to reflect on the present role of the learner and on their teaching function, besides the institution role in the DL context.

	0	1	2	3	4
The Academic Guide contributed to planning, understanding and organizing the activities I conducted along the course.	0	0	2	6	7
Occurred efficaciously owing to the use of the tools proposed	0	0	1	4	10
Had an original conception and a creative approach.	0	0	2	6	7
Caused and stimulated reflection on the themes treated	0	0	0	2	13
Provided an opportunity to reflect on the future application of the concepts and theoretical foundations discussed	0	0	0	2	13
Stimulated network collaboration	0	0	0	3	12
Agreed with the hour-load foreseen for studies	0	1	2	8	4
The different forms of AVA interaction were enough for the need for more presential lessons not to be felt.	0	1	4	6	4

Table 3: Learning experiences.

When asked about the contribution of the course guide for planning, understanding and organizing the activities, 13 learners, 86.7%, pointed out that they agreed with the statement, and 93.3% deemed that the tools resulted in the efficiency of the results, and 86.7% understood them to be original and creative.

The learning experiences were positively assessed by all of them.

Concerning the activities hour-load, only one-fifth of the group, three learners, mentioned, between grades 1 and 2, not to agree that the hour-load had been enough. Even though learners reported difficulty in getting organized for the presential meetings, one-third of them did not agree that the AVA activities could supply the need for more presential moments.

Networked Learning Assessment

Concerning tutorship, the following data were obtained:

	0	1	2	3	4
I managed to establish a bond with the tutor.	0	0	0	3	12
The tutor was willing to clear my doubts.	0	0	0	0	15
I could notice people following up my work and willing to help me when necessary.	0	0	0	4	11
The professor kept a friendly relationship with the group, stimulating group and individual participation.	0	0	0	1	14
The collaborative work methodology used by the professor contributed to understanding the concepts discussed.	0	0	0	4	11

The professor participation in the debates and discussions was essential for these interactions to have a good outcome.	0	0	0	4	11
The guidance provided by the professor for conducting the activities and works were adequate and sufficient.	0	0	0	0	15
The feedback provided by the tutor was adequate, sufficient and contributed to understanding the contents studied.	0	0	0	4	11
The assessment criteria established by the professor were clear and well defined.	0	0	0	1	14
The knowledge obtained in this course contributed to my professional activity (present or future)	0	0	2	1	12

Table 4: Networked **l**earning and tutor's role.

100% of the learners reported to have managed to establish a bond with the tutor, which valued participation in the conduction of the course and stimulated learners to attain their objectives. The collaborative work proposal and the professor mediation were also excellently assessed, as 100% declared their approval. The course assessment, through rubrics, also received full approval.

6 – Conclusions

The introduction of professors in programs of DL teaching capacity-building is always a significant challenge for the IES. The little familiarity of professors, belonging to the X and BB generations, with the technological resources and the virtual learning environment, is a relevant factor to hinder this intention. Another relevant datum is that the usual discourse that a little committed learner contributes to unsuccessful educational alternatives. This capacity-building advisor, with several years of DL experience, could verify that, when receiving professors in a learner's role, it was possible to recognize them as learners conventionally found in DL courses. Nevertheless, the experience was unanimously well assessed by the professors who managed to feel what it is like to be a DL course learner and how to develop the ideal profile to study in this modality, which allowed building significant knowledge, even in a better way than in the presential form.

The course tutorship served as an analysis to the professors and an example for future actuations in DL, making them clearly perceive the importance of the professor's mediation in this process. Conceiving learners at different learning paces was the most significant experience, and the complacency in the DL course dynamics allowing this to happen was the most relevant point in the professors' assessments.

The entire course planning (course guide) and its conduction was expressive for professors to obtain successful examples of how to conduct their disciplines in DL. Hence, the importance of professors' experience in a course with this modality is stressed so that they can feel how the educational process occurs in this transforming modality.

Note:
[1] X Generation are the people born after World War II, in a period between 1960 and 1970. That is, those born after a *baby boom* - according to the rule, those born between 1945 and 1955 (**Source**: Available in: <http://www.bernabauer.com> Accessed on: April 7, 2011).

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