Implementing the EAD at the Higher Education at UNIGRAN with its virtual learning environment

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Description of an ongoing Project

Abstract

This article briefly deals with the topic of learning from a distance provided by UNIGRAN as well as assessing such condition.

The aim is to present how the project of learning from a distance is being developed. It is very important to mention that this project has the support of the virtual UNIGRAN. UNIGRAN – Centro Universitário da Grande Dourados – makes this kind of learning possible for the Licenciate and Technology courses, for the Language and Argumentation disciplines, for the Sciences Methodology disciplines, the Didactic disciplines and for the Learning and Didactic disciplines.

These disciplines take place in the virtual UNIGRAN learning environment where professors teach virtually. This environment counts on a number of teaching tools. However, the most important tool is the Weblesson.

Key words: learning from a distance, the learning environment, virtual UNIGRAN.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article briefly reports on the implementation of some disciplines in the UNIGRAN Licenciate and Technology courses and also the disciplines for adaptation and/ or dependence based on the Article 80 of the law 9.394, 1996 and on display at the Judicial Directive nr. 2.253 from October 18th, 2001 available at the MEC site <www.mec.gov.br>.

The aim is to present how UNIGRAN is developing its learning from a distance courses. It is important to say that these courses count on the support of the virtual UNIGRAN.

The CEAD – Coordenadoria de Educação a Distância – has been evaluating both the professors' and students' activities in order to improve the project of educating from a distance as far as the material, the didactic and the methodology applied in the disciplines are concerned. Furthermore, this evaluation intends to improve not only the interface but also the usage of the tools in the learning environment at virtual UNIGRAN.

2. A BRIEF HISTORICAL REPORT

Learning from a distance has been introduced at UNIGRAN in 2003 within an initial project in the Political Science discipline in the Law course in the kind of an adaptation or dependence administration. Fifty-seven students attended this discipline and, according to figures provided by the UNIGRAN secretary, 10% failed. Such figure does not differ from that of the students who attended the regular discipline the year before.

The institution offers the students the opportunity to frequent up to two annual disciplines and three semiannual ones in which the student failed. This will later give him the right to pass to the next grade as stated in the articles 66 and 67 of the UNIGRAN rules. This is possible as the institution is changing its system from an annual one to a semiannual one. As far as the adaptation period is concerned, it can only be applied to those students who decided to transfer from another college to UNIGRAN. After being placed in a certain grade he may frequent other disciplines in other grades within an established limit number.

In 2004, six annual adaptation and/or dependence disciplines began to be offered – Scientific Methodology, Financial Mathematics, Biochemistry, Civil Right I, Labour Right and Procedural Labour Right. In August, 2004 other six semiannual adaptation and/or dependence disciplines were included: Political Science and State General Theory I, Financial Mathematics I, Scientific Methodology, the Portuguese Language, Biochemistry I and Civil Right I. Moreover, in the second term of 2004, four licenciate courses were implemented: Visual Arts, Arts, Mathematics and Pedagogy and also four disciplines: Development Psychology II, Latin Language and Literature, Applied Psychology to Education and Didactic.

In December, 2004 UNIGRAN formally asked MEC to give it credencials to offer a distance post-graduate *Latu Sensu* course and, later on April 1st, 2005, the courses could establish their credentials under the Judicial Directive nr. 1.087.

At present in 2005 UNIGRAN has enlarged the number of disciplines offered in the adaptation and/or dependence period: annual disciplines (the Portuguese Language, Scientific Methodology, Financial Mathematics, Biochemistry, Labour Right, Procedural Labour Right, Didactic, General Psychology, Introduction to Law, Political Science) and semiannual disciplines (the Portuguese Language, Scientific Methodology, Financial Mathematics I, Financial Mathematics II, Biochemistry I, Civil Right I, Political Science and State General Theory I, Political Science and State General Theory II, Didactic and Psychology), as well as the disciplines offered in the Licenciate courses – Writing, the Portuguese Language I, Language and Expression, Language and Argumentation, Sciences Methodology, Didactic, the History of Mathematics and the Philosophy of the Sciences, Learning Psychology and Appplied Psychology to Education and the disciplines offered in the Technology courses (Agronomy and Aesthetic) – Language and Argumentation. These disciplines are supported by the virtual UNIGRAN learning environment which will be later detailed.

It is important to mention that UNIGRAN is trying to make both disciplines Scientific Methodology and the Portuguese Language available for two FUNLEC - Fundação Lowtons de Educação e Cultura - poles in a semi-presential modality. These poles are Campo Grande and Bonito, both in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. UNIGRAN is also trying to develop a program in partnership with two Higher Education Institutions: one in in the state of São Paulo and another one in Brasília.

3. THE VIRTUAL UNIGRAN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The term *learning environment* emerged from *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* – CSCW, created by Geif and Cashman in 1984. Nowadays, the expression Computer Supported Cooperative Learning – CSCL, is being used instead, having as a facilitator the learning-teaching process at EAD.

> "One of the biggest problems in learning from a distance is the environment, which is reduced to a place where texts and contents are searched for. The more research, exchange and collective a course can offer, the better this course is. As there is a lack of the presence of the teacher, it is necessary to provide a wide range of materials, which are more auto-explicative, and with more resources (*links*, resource, texts, glossary, activities). This implies that an interdisciplinary team must be formed putting together technicians and pedagogues who are able to work together, meet deadlines and contribute to discussions." (MORAN, 2002)

We took Moran´s quotation into consideration in order to create the virtual UNIGRAN learning environment, which was programmed in the PHP language and uses an INTERBASE databank (*Borland* Databank Managing System) and a LINUX server. The HTML language – Hyper Text Markup Language – was also used to produce the pages for the learning environment.

This environment has been totally programmed and structured in the UNIGRAN ITD – Information Technology Department - , where IT professionals have been playing a vital role in developing and enriching the virtual environment.

This environment has some basic tools like agenda, charts, portfolio, forum, chat rooms, links, access control, possibility of changing your own personal information. It also counts on the WEBlesson, in which the students can have a better visualization as the Weblesson has been programmed in HTML. It can also be downloaded in the pdf format.

The Virtual Unigran learning environment can be accessed by the site <www.unigran.br/cead> and the user receives a login and an access password to attend the disciplines. The site is still being developed considering the fact that it must suit the professors´ and the students´ needs.

> "Of course we need to study the way students use a method in particular, in the context of every other ways and methods that constitute that way of teaching and that way of learning in particular [...]." (DANIEL, 2003, p. 18)

4. CHOOSING THE DISCIPLINES

We have used a criteria for choosing the disciplines that would be offered from a distance: the disciplines that demanded a Saturday attendance. As many of our students commute to attend University, we thought that this must be the most appropriate criteria to be used. As the map belows shows, UNIGRAN absorbs students from about 37 towns like Caarapó, Maracaju, Rio Brilhante, Fátima do Sul, Laguna Caarapã, Ivinhema, Juti, Naviraí, Deodápolis, Nova Alvorada do Sul, Glória de Dourados, Itaporã, Nova Alvorada, among others which are have a distance of between 15 to 190 km from Dourados.
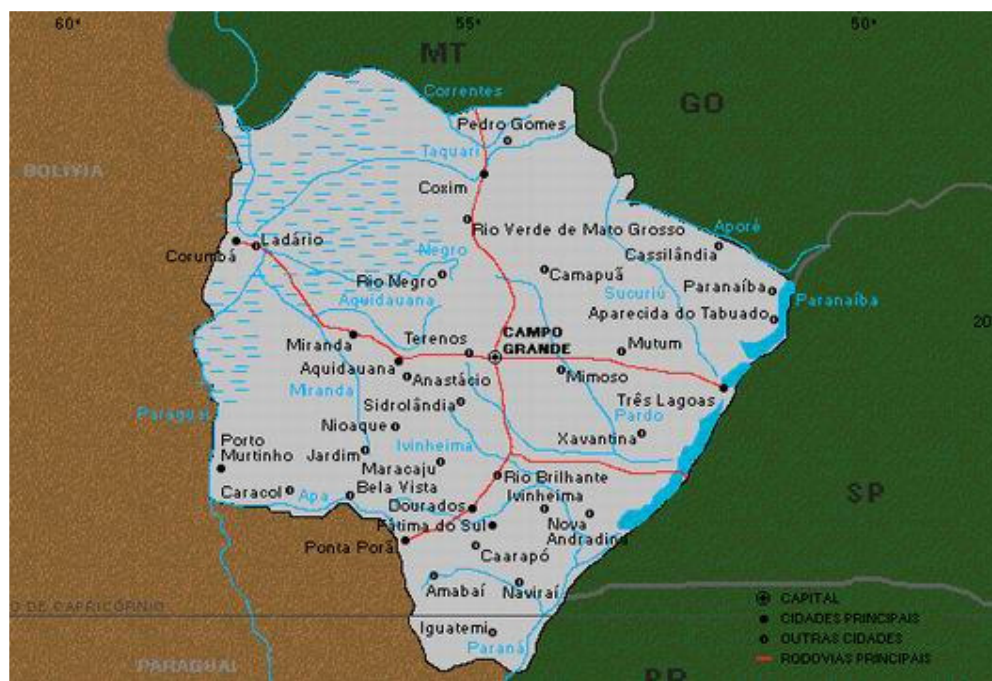
Map of the State of Mato Grosso do Sul. Extracted from: http://www.portalbrasil.net/images/mapa_ms.jpg . Accessed on January 20th, 2005.

Hence, students could be dismissed of compulsorily having to attend the Saturday lessons. However, they must be present at the exams, at the substitute tests, and at the final exams, which are scheduled in advance.

Such method has been deeply meaningful, specially for the Technology in Aesthetic and Cosmetology due to the fact that many of the students, who attend this course, have their beauty salons and as a result, Saturday is known to be the most busy day for them. Moreover, what concerns us is the considerable discomfort of students having to commute every night. The fact of the matter is that there are some towns which on Saturdays only offer buses in the mornings. Consequently, students who must attend DP – a discipline for those who have failed and which only takes place in the afternoons – take the bus in the morning, to attend a lesson that takes place in the afternoon and then just go back to their hometown early in the evening.

5. PREPARING THE MATERIAL

The material has been designed by highly qualified professors both Masters and Doctorates who spent several months carefully preparing a plan for their semiannual lessons.

> "In point of fact, we should invest more in studying the productivity of *online* teaching and learning. The goal is to get professors to use their time to prepare learning activities that would factually help students master their learning productivity." (DANIEL, 2003, p. 90)

After defining which contents would be part of the course, the material was handed to CEAD which adjusted the language to the condition of learning from a distance. Afterwards, they returned the corrections to the professors in charge so that they could approve the corrections. Next, the material was taken to UNIGRAN IT department to be processed and converted into the WEBlesson.

CEAD tried to focus the work on the Virtual UNIGRAN tools that were intended to draw studens into the content by participating in chats and forums. This would make technology sounds more effective to students, as quoted on Daniel (2003):

> ´[...] there are some activities students are able to do by themselves, i.e. reading a book, watching a TV programme, listening to a conference or to a recording on audiocassette, writing an essay and making mathematics calculations. Such activities comprises a great deal of the learning process, at least at higher education. Hence, these are the activities that enable students to use IT to enlarge their access [...].´ (DANIEL, 2003, p. 57).

> ´We need effective online learning applications that are interactive in a sophisticated level – something more than just exchanging pages.´ (DANIEL, 2003, p. 89)

6. APPLYING THE DISCIPLINE

> "Students are used to listening passively to their professors and students generally expect professors to provide them with the information they need. It is common to overhear people saying: "I pay this university, so I want them to teach me." and they complain when professors ask them to do more researches and group work." (MORAN, 2003).

At first, students did not accept the idea of having lessons from a distance, via Internet, due to the simple fact that some students had never been exposed to a real use of the computer and some still do not feel confident enough to study without the presence of a professor.

As an attempt to fulfill this need, some professors gave some intensive training lessons in which they would introduce students to every detail of the tools that were going to be used in the course. As far as the absence of the professor is concerned, students are slowly getting used to being sent e-mails and reading messages from the charts. By reason of these procedures, students are getting more and more independent. Students can even count on some tutors who stay at CEAD and who are qualified to help those students that have difficulty in accessing the learning environment as well as help them with any problem concerning the use of the computer. Finally, these tutors can also guide students towards completing the tasks the professors have previously devised. As a consequence, students would get integrated in the learning-teaching process from a distance.

Campos et al (2003) support the idea that applying these collaborative studies is a technique in which students help each other in the learning process and together they would reach a common goal: the acquisition of knowledge about a particular subject.

Woodbine (1997) believes that this learning approach should rely on:

- individual responsibility for the information gathered by a group effort;

- positive interdependence which means one can only achieve success when everyone else has achieved it;

- a better way of understanding a given material, which later students would have to explain to the whole group;

- developing interpersonal abilities which are necessary in other situations in the students´ life;

- developping an ability to analise a group dynamics and work with problem-solving activities – this is proved to raise students´ activities and involvement;

- an interesting and funny focus.

We try not only to teach subjects but also to insert a way of assessing that is satisfactory and meaningful. Many queries appear, such as ´How can we evaluate students´ work through the internet? How can we measure the homework and be sure that the essay has really been done by the student himself? Must there be moments in which the presence should be compulsory? What is the best way to evaluate the students´ participation, is it by assessing individual work or group one?´

According to Campos et al (2003):

> "Assessing the learning process is a group of organized actions aiming at obtaining information about what, how and in which conditions the information has been acquired by the student.

> Assessments must work as a tool that enables the assessor to critically analise its practice; and, on the other hand, as an instrument that provides the person who is being assessed with a possibility of knowing about his recent advances, his difficulties and probabilities." (CAMPOS et al, 2003, p. 71).

There are many assessment ways, but they must be coherent for their theory and action. Assessing is an integrated part in the learning-teaching process and it can measure and/ or qualify the activities – quantitative assessment (marks from 0,0 to 10,0 or A,B, C, D & E) and qualitative assessment (a continuous [re]assessing process) – to determine if the applied process has been effective in helping students master the contents.

According to Souza (1999), evaluating by giving a test is the most common system; however, it is not enough. Consequently, this is the way we consider when pondering the marks: assessing these disciplines is done with the presence of the professor who schedules a date in advance. In case it is difficult for the student to come and have the test, they may take the substitute test. For those who were unable to achieve the average, another chance is given, i.e. another final exam. If the discipline is semiannual, there is also the possibility of doing the course´s final exam a second-time during the following semester. The bimonthly average, i.e. the students´ bimonthly evaluation is based on the following aspects: access to the Virtual UNIGRAN, handing activities in, assiduity and taking a bimonthly test. The professor is given the advances and the difficulties each student have in his/ her learning process. This can be provided after the evaluation period. The evaluation also implies in a re-arrangement and re-adjustment of the professors´ teaching techniques. The more the student become independent, the better chances s/he will have to overcome all the obstacles. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that learning must be total rather than partial, observing more than just the written test (paper and pencil); the activities developed during the learning process must also be taken into consideration.

> "It is important to remember that both ways of testing must work together, and a good professor depends on both the quantitative and the qualitative assessments to evaluate the students´ development." (CAMPOS et al, 2003, p. 119)

> "Scriven (1967) and Stufflebeam (1971) were the first to distinguish the two ways of assessing: the formative assessment and the adding assessment. The formative assessment is that in which the student is assessed by their productions and by the observation of the professors during all their learning-teaching process. The adding assessment is that in which goals are established and later tested, normally half-way and in the end of the term." (CAMPOS et al, 2003, p. 121.).

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The work which has been developed by the professors of learning from a distance disciplines together with CEAD aims at improving and enlarging the virtual UNIGRAN learning environment.

After being adequated to this new teaching modality, the great majority of the students seemed to be satisfied because of the fact that they could both make an efficient use of their time and improve their computerization skills.

There has been an increasing number of students and professors who ask for having more learning from a distance disciplines available. Some students have informally stated that they have had a better acquisition of contents during this semi-presential modality, as there is a higher need for dedication.

On the other hand, there are some students who still do not accept this modality. Nevertheless, it is important that we try to change this attitude.

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