

# **AUTONOMY IN DISTANCE LEARNING: Reflections over the learner's role**

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**Abstract**

*Distance Learning (DL) relates to every teaching-learning process in which the actual presence of students and teachers is replaced by technological mediation. This study traces a brief history of DL worldwide and in Brazil, as it's essential to refer to such history in order to understand this educational genre which complies each day more with students' demand for a new way of learning, making it possible to analyze the main pragmatic changes considered by researchers as fundamental. Particular emphasis is given to both teachers' and students' roles so that DL may truly accomplish its aim: providing full and continuous experiences of collaborative knowledge production. We believe that simply establishing new plans concerning the school syllabus, developing new and creative learning environments or "re-inventing" the teacher are not enough to reach the desired results. It's high time to "re-invent" the students, the central agent of the whole process, whose change in attitude concerning the learning process is essential so that real transformations may effectively take place.*

**Key words: Distance Learning and Education, autonomy, learner's role.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It seems unanimous opinion among researchers that the issue of spreading access to knowledge as well as the future of education go through Distance Learning (DL) in all its genres. The first formal version of DL took place in the USA at the end of the XIX century through a correspondence course offered by Chicago University and gradually spread worldwide. In the early 1970's in England a university totally focused on the concept of DL is settled. The Open University, during the 70's, 80's and 90's, aggregates all the available technology to teaching, becoming a reference to a number of countries.

DL in Brazil starts in 1904 through work training correspondence courses. During this period (DL first generation) this teaching genre was hardly known by Brazilians. Throughout technological innovations such as the telephone, radio and TV, there comes the second generation. Distance default courses supported by private organizations offered satellite broadcast lessons which were combined with printed materials. The development of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) in the late 90's leads to the creation of college institutions based on the concept of Virtual Universities - the so called DL third generation.

Including ICTs in DL leads to the predominance of e-learning (using the Web 2.0 and virtual learning environments as a way of mediation between student/contents as well as student/teacher), crossing geographical frontiers and overcoming the need that such interaction should happen through a synchronous or face to face way. This brand new reality urges for a vital change in the paradigms which for ages have been the north of the teaching/learning process. Altered is what we understand as presence, as lesson. New meaning is given to the concepts of teaching and learning and premises where the process occurs are reorganized. Home and office become classrooms and virtual courses beat face to face ones. (Moran 1994, p.2) All these changes urge for a redefinition in the roles of the actors of the process, especially of the ones placed in the two ends of the process: teachers and students. The image of the teacher as responsible for passing on knowledge around whom students gravitate vanishes. This proposed educational "re-engineering" needs creating

multidisciplinary teams whose competences complement each other. The hierarchy of functions must be replaced by collaborative work. In this new context the teacher loses the status of a lighthouse that guides the path and takes up the role of manager of the teaching/learning process, of the one who makes the link between students' background knowledge and contents proposed in order to create new knowledge. Instead, he leads them to building up their own learning throughout the social-interactionist approach proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky. No longer are we dealing with knowing how to teach, but focusing on how to learn, comprehending how such process occurs and proposing strategies to get over difficulties which might become obstacles to it. Moreover, this new teacher must be able to deal with technological tools, especially the ones related to computers, what will facilitate the proposal of new interaction strategies and converting specific contents to various media (Carvalho, 2007). Finally, it is required that this practitioner is flexible enough to work in a team, humble in order to practice self-evaluation and accept criticism, wise to propose new pedagogical strategies, open to negotiating and able to establish continuous conversation with students and collaborators. According to Authier (apud Carvalho, 2007), teachers are "producers when creating course guidelines, counselors while monitoring students and partners when, along with technology specialists, they build up innovative learning approaches."

On the other tip of the cord we find the students, protagonists of the whole process. On them are the innovations and new strategies focused, for them are the learning and interaction platforms thought of. In the name of learners are educational paradigms and teachers' roles thought over. In the DL process students are invited to participate, pushed on searching for and exchanging information and called up to be autonomous. They are the ones to become an actual part of the building up knowledge process. What we wonder is if learners are aware of this necessity: are they ready and willing to take up such role? This article intends to deepen the studies on the upcoming transformations, raising reflections and questioning students' roles throughout this educational re-engineering imposed by the great deal of changes brought within the new technologies which aim knowledge production and the growing of DL.

## 2. THE STUDENT'S ROLE IN DISTANCE LEARNING

An always present issue in discussions concerning the teacher's role and responsibilities is the high drop-out level.

Studies about DL students' learning process show high drop-out levels, but only a handful portray such students' profile, as well as the relationship among learners, the choice of DL learning genre, experiences in the learning processes and drop-out reasons. (FRAGA, 2005, p.224)

Instead, studies discuss teachers' roles and the need of methodologies which promote learning. We ramble around developing learners' autonomy and having them on the spotlight of the educational process. But who are these learners? What are they like? Are they ready to develop such autonomy?

Graduating through DL courses demands different conditions from face to face ones. One who searches for a DL course must be strictly responsible for his own studies and learning, and also aware his own difficulties. (FRAGA, apud GATTI, 2005, p.225)

Autonomy is a fundamental skill in any learner in both distance and face to face courses, as in the two genres the challenge of discovering new learning models may be found – a challenge that concerns institutions, teachers and learners. Teaching *how* to learn is not only being in a classroom, but also changing what is done there. In this context it is crystal clear the necessity of creating individuals capable of reining their own learning. But how might this be done? This need is not a privilege of DL, but of any graduation course willing to graduate qualified practitioners and citizens. Silva (2004, p.2) shows the need of developing a pedagogical practice which focus on more than simply acquiring information. Galeffi (apud Silva, 2004) says that "there is a necessity of investing on a humanistic education of autonomous and inventive individuals".

Guiding individuals to these abilities is one of the roles of education. According to Silva, this role involves factors such as acquiring critical, creative and participative thinking. It demands a kind of learning which insures mastering concepts, comprehending the framework beyond learning which lies on a global view of culture as well as theoretical base to analyze and interpret reality. Moreover, it is essential to set up an educational practice that attaches theory to practice in social, political and cultural contexts.

This guidance is generally offered during the first terms of graduation courses throughout subjects such as Scientific Methodology, Philosophy, History of Physical Education, Mathematics or Law, according to the career. It is

noticed in the majority of students attending these classes a feeling of being lost, having no idea of what to do or how to develop projects they are asked to do. They seem not to know why they have to attend that course. The fact of being physically present in a classroom combined with deadlines and teachers' demands usually leads them to get over these feelings and kickoff the development of their autonomy as learners. In DL genre, instead, it is needed that the learner has already acquired studying habits and routines in order to master his own learning. According to Arcúrio (2008, p.2)

Autonomy is a true conquer which is consolidated with maturity, growing and intimacy (...) Autonomy in learning requires discipline, decision taking, organization, persistence, motivation, evaluation and responsibility.

It is also crucial to discuss the concept of transactional distance developed by Michael Moore (apud Mattar Neto, 2008). Moore states that the physical and temporal distance between teacher and student creates a new space/environment which must be considered as pedagogical and psychological, as interpersonal relationships are established inside it. What determines transactional distance (or proximity) is the level of interaction among students / teachers, students / students and students / contents. If, on one side, the teacher is responsible for developing interactive learning objects capable of decreasing transactional distance, the student, on the other, must have an active role in the educational process instead of simply being a repository of content. By continuously offering orientation and materials, DL ruptures with the temporal aspect in teaching and learning. But the ease in access does not mean increasing the amount of time a learner spends on his studies, as the absence of autonomy is noticeable. Non-temporality brings with it the possibility of an increase in the transactional distance, therefore becoming obstacles to the learning process. "The compression between space and time, that is, redefining two essential categories to human beings provokes problems in dealing with time, which will always seem longer than it actually is". (CARVALHO, 2007 p.3) The flexibility offered by DL, an appeal that obviously influences the choice for this learning genre becomes an enemy when we think that "no matter he student's expectations, his learning experience has taken place in a traditional school (...) No incentive towards building up autonomous or critical knowledge can be found in this student". (Carvalho, 2007, pp.4-5). Managing one's own studying time is not an easy task. It demands long and difficult adaptation.

The students' difficulty in building up autonomy leads to drop-outs. Arcúrio highlights that the "commitment with the learning process is not something ever lasting; it transmogrifies. Improving it (...) is not a challenge that belongs only to distance learning, but to education". Alves e Junior (2006), based on *moodle* reports, confirm that several students have enormous problems in becoming "masters" of their own learning. Insufficient reading of available materials and a reduced number of participants in online tasks added to "visiting" the virtual environment just to register a presence point to the passive way in which a great deal of students behave when facing the teaching/learning process.

We live in an era without any precedents in the history of humanity, when the access to different media and technology has become much more present in every human's life than in past times. Most youngsters interact daily with computers, cell phones and Web 2.0 tools. However, this happens in a context of leisure. Even though it might bring some kind of knowledge it is not a systematic one. While interacting with learning environments that offer interactivity and flexibility but require autonomy (a vital quality to achieve the desired dialectic knowledge construction, loneliness emerges, together with the feeling of being isolated and abandoned, thus arising transactional distance. The use of learning environments that offer virtual immersion, such as *Second Life*, could be seen as a solution that would minimize isolation as it brings "presence" back to learning (Mattar Neto, 2008). Nevertheless, the feeling of sharing or the playful atmosphere of *Second Life* do not remove the need for autonomy. Learning and "processing" information are personal phenomena. They are solitary and autonomous. Saldanha (2008) points out that "creative solitude occurs as a necessity in the educational process". The student's commitment to these phenomena and being open to learn are essential ingredients in the learning process. There is no learning without them, no matter the strategies chosen. Encouraging such "creative solitude" is a task for all practitioners in the field of education.

## **2.1 Developing Autonomy**

Autonomy is something that takes place inside "creative solitude". Besides independence, being autonomous requires self-determination and the

capacity of making decisions as well as regulating the learning process. “Autonomy is the responsibility of being in charge of one’s own learning.” (ANDRADE, 2003) It is known, however, that few students have such ability, as they have never been asked to do so. “Therefore, autonomy must be taught and conquered.” (NICOLAIDES & FERNANDES, 2001, apud ANDRADE, 2003). If we want an autonomous student we need an autonomous teacher beforehand. However, the teacher, during his experience as a former student and his instructional training is taught to centralize, make the decisions and be in control of the classroom. The students get used to a passive learning, with contents presented merely to be reproduced. Very often this student resists when producing and building up knowledge are expected from him. A clear example of such attitude may be noticed in foreign language teaching (FLT) , in which “autonomy grew stronger with the development of the communicative approach, once it has changed the learner’s role, making him responsible for his own learning, decentralizing the teacher’s role” (ANDRADE, 2003).

Based on humanistic principles instead of behaviorist ones, the Communicative Approach (...) parts from memorization techniques, preaches that we use language to express communicate intentions, which we expect to have some sort of effect on those who listen to us. (...) It represents a complete change in FLT, since it has moved the focus from the teacher to the student, who have now to be active rather than having a passive or receptive role in the learning process. It turns the teacher into a facilitator instead of an explanation or knowledge provider. The learner is the main focus of the process, along with their needs and expectations, considering each one as a unique individual and therefore exploring their own abilities and potentialities. (CAMARA, 2010)

There are teachers, in the field of FL teaching, who are capable of promoting autonomy, due to innumerous materials and congresses held by associations. Nevertheless, many students resist this way of teaching and learning. They urge that the teacher gives grammar rules and vocabulary lists, instead of building new linguistic forms based on what is presented to them. This attitude is due to “students’ previous experiences, determined by the traditional tendency of reproducing educational practices. (...) often requiring psychological and methodological deconditioning. “The level of guidance to be ‘exerted’ by the teacher will depend on the level of autonomy students have” (VIEIRA, 1999) and promoting students’ autonomy becomes a not really easy task.

## 2.2 The Importance of Study Habits and Routines

A recent article based on research done by the magazine *Época* corroborates the need of autonomy and mentions study routines, still weak in several students, reiterating the importance of learners' personal effort and parental accompaniment:

The research (...) detected old-fashioned concepts of how to boost knowledge. Most parents worry excessively about school marks and too little about encouraging reading habits or making sure that the child is actually learning. (...) This is not enough, mainly in a country like Brazil, whose advances in the field of education have not been satisfactory. A report from the Ministry of Education shows that between 2001 and 2008 the country has only reached one third of goals established by the Educational National Plan. Drop-outs at secondary school have increased from 5% to 13%. (...) However, islands of excellence can be found. There are brilliant students, curious, struggling, involved in the process and capable of learning. They are ordinary boys and girls who belong to state and private schools, rich and poor, who go to school and... learn. (*Época*, nº616, 2010).

The article lists examples which clearly show that “modernizing” teaching and re-training education practitioners to act in a new outlook concerning the relationship teacher/student is as important as parents taking on the task of educating their children and that students take on their learners' roles. One of the examples mentioned is the one of a teenager who lives in the west area of Rio de Janeiro and studies full time at *Centro Federal de Educação Tecnológica Celso Fucow Fonseca* (CEFET), considered as one of the best technical schools in Brazil. The adolescent leaves home at 5 AM only returning at 8:30 PM. Yet, he usually studies until 10 PM as well as at least two hours on Sundays. Such struggle is due to the shock when joining CEFET. Despite the fact he had been one of the best students in the state school he used to attend, the gap between what he had learnt compared to his schoolmates, mostly from middle class families, was huge. Through his effort he managed to reverse the low marks received in the first evaluations. Cases like this adolescent's reinforce the need of personal effort for effective learning. Not a single technological resource, teacher or pedagogical strategy may ever be able to replace the student in his own learning. The student's ability of being autonomous is the essential component in the teaching/learning process, especially in DL genre.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The most important aim in DL is making education accessible to most people. DL educational value does not lie on technology, but on building up knowledge. We believe that, no matter the educational genre chosen by an individual, the desire for learning must be higher than the desire for “knowing”. In order to be able to perform the capacity of learning and build up knowledge the student must have an active and independent role, making decisions and acting over the contents he receives and generating new concepts based on it. It is known, however, that most students are not capable of (or used to) performing such qualities in their learning practice, despite the learning genre. The educational model in Brazil can still be seen as traditional, in which the teacher transmits knowledge and the students simply reproduce it – creative solitude is not stimulated. The teacher mirrors in his practice the same model through which he was taught. A lot is said about different pedagogical approaches rather than the traditional one, but it is widely known that applying the principles of these approaches is not an actual part of most instructional courses in both secondary and higher education.

One of the biggest challenges of DL nowadays is to train professionals who to act as mediators of the learning process who are capable of changing the focus of the educational process from the teacher to the student. Moreover, this new teacher will have to be able to show students the importance of performing an active role in the learning process, guiding their study habits and routines, stimulating interactions and continually evaluating the whole educational process. However, it can not be expected from this professional that he may short-term change the learner’s characteristics. Public policies in the educational area have privileged the search for a degree instead of knowledge. Despite talks based on socio-constructivist ideas, learning is still considered as a process that is external to the student. Re-training the one who teaches is not enough – it is also necessary to re-train the one who learns. This is the only way to give a new meaning to the teaching/learning process, turning it into partnership rather than a passive process as it has been so far.

The fact that the student is not autonomous to check doubts in content or viewing the searching as partnership becomes even more serious in DL, hindering learning and leading to a high number of drop-outs. The solution is

stimulating autonomy despite the educational genre. It is noticed, therefore, the urge for transmogrifying the whole educational process since primary school, in order to provide all students with the acquisition of study habits and routines and, mainly, teach them how to take over autonomy and be responsible for one's own learning.

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