

CONCEPTION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE UNIASSELVI DISTANCE EDUCATION POST GRADUATION PROGRAMME

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Elisabeth Penzlien Tafner – UNIASSELVI – elisabeth.pos@uniasselvi.com.br

Janes Fidélis Tomelin – UNIASSELVI – coordenacao.pos@uniasselvi.com.br

Norberto Siegel – UNIASSELVI - norberto.pos@uniasselvi.com.br

Strategies and Policies

Continued Education in General

Description of Ongoing Project

Report of Innovative Experience

SUMMARY

This article aims at presenting the experience in the establishment of a post-graduation “lato sensu” programme in the Distance Education Mode, at UNIASSELVI. The proposal involves the definition of the conception of Distance Education, the presentation of a model and its operationalization and the pedagogical and didactic orientations for the construction of self-learning materials. The methodology used for the elaboration of this work was the report of the authors’ experience in Distance Education. It was observed that this experience was based on a cooperative and significant learning philosophy and contributes to the development of projects in the field of continuous education in Distance Education.

Key words: distance education; methodology; self-learning materials

1 - Introduction

The authors share their experiences as authors, proofreaders/revisers and trainers at UNIASSELVI, which has allowed them to add competencies and abilities to develop the UNIASSELVI post-graduation programme, pedagogically planned to cater for the demand of undergraduate students from the institution, whose guiding principles indicated its vocation for offering Distance Education Courses.

Along this work, we present a report of how the processes of identification of the projects with the institution’s conception of Distance

Education, organization of course models to supply the needs of the academic community and selection, training and orientation of teachers in the elaboration of the self learning materials for the course occurred. Parallel to this, we describe the first results obtained from the project with regards to the models and the pedagogical materials.

2 – Definition of the Conception of Distance Education

Developing a project to offer specialization courses in Distance Education presupposes the definition of what is understood by the conception of Distance Education as a priority. Although seemingly a simple matter, there are diverse conceptions, as singular as the educational policies, educational approaches and institutional cultures might be. Another variable that contributes towards the difference in the conception of Distance Education lies in the diversity of the courses proposed, some of which are mainly presential whereas others are predominantly virtual and others develop mixed activities.

The multidisciplinary team responsible for the outlining of the UNIASSELVI post-graduation programme respected the institution's culture of Distance Education and identified that in its conception it considers guaranteeing the relationship between teacher and student and the support of means and methods for the development of the educational process as priorities. This characteristic is emphasized in the following section, from the growth in numbers of groups where there is direct contact of the learners with their tutors, which is a differential in the institution's experience. Thus the conception of Distance Education in the post-graduation programme has developed in a way that allows for the development of autonomy, interactivity and cooperation in the educational processes.

The conception of Distance Education adopted by UNIASSELVI is an approximation of the concept of *blended learning*, which is a combination of presential and virtual learning. According to Tori,

If in the presential mode it is easier to engage the student, socialize the group and obtain diverse results and types of feedback [...], with the support of virtual resources it is possible to cater for the different learning styles and rhythms and increase both the teacher's and the learner's productivity. *Blended learning* thus has a great potential to better the quality and efficiency in learning.^[1]

Both the conception and practice of Distance Education at UNIASSELVI have their major referential in the institutional principles, described in the Institutional Development Plan (PDI) along four lines (listed on the left column in Table 1 below), which suggests that the institution was created with a favourable identity for the purposes of Distance Education. For the post-graduation programme, the following relationships are noteworthy (listed in the right column of Table 1 below):

GUIDING PRINCIPLES	DISTANCE EDUCATION CHARACTERISTICS
It is not enough to know, one needs to know how to do it	Knowledge/competence
Each person has to construct her own history	Autonomy
Form entrepreneurs	Self-organization/Discipline
Negotiation as methodology of human relationship	Interactivity/Cooperation/Mediation

Table 1. UNIASSELVI's guiding principles and the characteristics of Distance Education

Another reference that supports the project is based on Brazilian legislation, where the following definition of distance education is found:

Art. 1. Distance Education is a means of learning that allows for self-learning, with the mediation of didactic resources systematically organized, presented in different information supports, used isolatedly or in combination, and conveyed through various means of communication ^[2].

Key words of this concept are: self-learning, mediation and information support. These helped the multidisciplinary team in the planning of actions for the interaction and relationship among teachers, tutors and students. On the one hand, there is the teacher with roles of author and tutor; on the other, the student who has autonomy. Between these role players, there are the didactic resources organized from different technologies.

Thus a project that took into consideration teaching and learning with intense cooperation among students, teachers, tutors, multidisciplinary team and coordination was planned, from the starting idea that a mixed approach would best cater for the students and the need for technological mediations, institutional material for individual and group studies, marked by bidirectional communications, and planned and predicted activities routine as described in the following sections.

The UNIASSELVI Post-Graduation Distance Education programme has thus been created with the following objectives:

- Offer updating and deepening of contents pertinent to each reality from a proactive pedagogical mediation and a functional technological mediation.
- Contribute to the professional qualification of managers and educators with a proposal that takes into consideration the knowing how to and the doing it.
- Form specialists with competencies to answer to the human and social needs of a globalized world.
- Extend the possibilities of professional performance.

In relation to these objectives, the UNIASSELVI proposal for the post-graduation programme in the Distance Education mode has contemplated different characteristics of Distance Education that improve the teaching-learning process. These are characteristics that combine strategies that have obtained good results in different generations in the history of Distance Education and, depending on the target public, still present themselves as functional and viable. Consequently, the resources for the UNIASSELVI proposal are: self-learning material; presential and online tutoring; virtual learning platform material and video classes. These resources have been developed according to the following criteria:

- Writing of the material in dialogic style and self learning content
- Development of presential meetings for studying, exchanging of ideas, interpersonal relationships and evaluation.
- Mediation of presential meetings by a professional with specialization in the course.
- Proactive online mediation, developed by tutors with formation in the course being taught.
- Virtual resources of interaction and collaborative learning.
- Video classes for deepening of contents.

As well as this, during the project's execution the tutor's role is one of the variables that, combined with multimedia resources, have defined the identity of UNIASSELVI's post-graduation courses. The fundamental occurs during the process of construction of knowledge by a learning community. This experience matches Preti's^[3] rationale, when he remembers that "technological mediation cannot eliminate or try to replace human mediation". Under this perspective, the interactive structure was optimized by means of presential meetings, the mode which was best perceived by our students, when various situations that require collaborative work are proposed. In these opportunities, the tutor promotes a feeling of being together, community, society, comradeship, feelings that are indispensable for the teaching and learning

process. For these reasons the characteristics of the Distance Education specialization courses offered by UNIASSELVI are described next.

3 - Model and Operationalization of Distance Education

In 2005, the Centro Universitário Leonardo da Vinci – UNIASSELVI – received Ministerial Directive 4.017/2005 which allowed for the teaching of distance courses in the whole country. We participated in this process, initially as teachers-authors of study books and later, in the proofreading of didactic materials and the follow-up of the working process of the courses.

In mid-2008, UNIASSELVI had excellent results in the distance education undergraduate courses. Driven by this experience, the institution started thinking of a programme for a post-graduation specialization course with the aim of catering for its own undergraduate students.

After several meetings, discussions and debates about which way to follow, the post-graduation courses were structured in 11 disciplines with a total of 380 credit hours, organized in two nuclei. The fundamental nucleus, formed by five disciplines of general pertinence to the course, and the specific nucleus, formed by six disciplines directly related to the needs of each course.

Aiming at catering for the different student needs and profiles, two forms of organization and functioning of the courses were developed: semi-presential and online.

The UNIASSELVI post-graduation course, **semi-presential and distance education mode**, was organized in three modules. In each module there are 3 or 4 disciplines. At the end of each module the students sit an evaluation with 10 objective questions that are related to the content of each discipline covered in the respective module.

The semi-presential proposal arises from the Freirean conception that interaction allows for a communion between what is known and what is done by the participants. In his rationale, Freire states that:

[...] even though different from each other, he who forms forms himself and re-forms while forming and he who is formed forms himself and re-forms while being formed. It is in this sense that teaching is not the transfer of knowledge, contents, nor is formation the action by which a creator subject gives shape, style or soul to an indecisive, accommodated body. [...] He who teaches learns by teaching and he who learns teaches by learning.^[4]

Respecting this conception, the course takes place over 14 presential meetings, which constitute a moment of study, interaction and evaluation under a tutor's mediation. Each of the meetings is divided into two moments: firstly, a moment of welcome, discussion of the study activities and cooperative evaluation of what was done in the previous meeting. The presentation of the next discipline (video class) is next, with the handing out of the study books, presentation of self-activities of the Study Book and other recommendations according to each discipline. The table below describes the way in which the meetings are held:

Presential Meeting	Schedule One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Welcome - Discussion of self learning activities - Cooperative learning activity
	Schedule Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discipline presentation - Handing out of self learning material - Previous knowledge and signification - Directions/Recommendations

Table 2. Organization of presential meetings

At the end of the semi-presential course, each student presents an individual Senior Research Project, at a date up to three months after the conclusion of the course's last discipline.

In the **online mode**, the student receives a pedagogical kit (study book, video class and operational instructions) for each discipline at home, which is specially prepared for the course he has enrolled in.

During the course, students count with a virtual learning platform that makes it possible for students, tutors and teachers-authors to interact, in synchronicity or not, even if they are geographically separated, through the various tools available to cater for the needs of all involved in the learning process.

Under this type of organization, the pedagogical function is linked to the online tutor, whose objective is that of supporting the student in reaching a specific learning competence that is relevant to the discipline, such as: information, orientation, feedback and discussions leading to the student's specific focus of interest.

The system of evaluation of learning is developed on a monthly basis in the virtual platform, in each discipline, according to schedule. The student takes formative evaluation 1, of descriptive nature, which assesses his capacity of interpretation, comprehension and knowledge of the content presented in the

study book, and formative evaluation 2, composed by 20 objective questions about the content of the study book.

Students who follow the online mode take a presential evaluation of all disciplines covered during the course, which follows the Education Ministry's (MEC) demands, according to resolution n.1 dated 8 June 2007, Art. 6: "The *lato sensu* post-graduation courses offered as distance courses shall include presential evaluations and individual presentation of monograph or senior research project".^[5]

When launching these two learning modes (semi-presential and online), the expectation was to have more students enroll in the online courses. Fourteen months after the effective implementation of the first courses, it is noticeable that the semi-presential courses have had a bigger demand, in a 3 to 1 proportion; that is, for each student enrolled in the online mode there are 3 who choose to enroll in the semi-presential mode, which coincides with the institution's conception of distance education presented in the previous section.

In offering these two learning modes as part of our programme, what can be summarised is that at first students prioritize the contact, exchange of experiences and direct interaction. In the same sense, Belloni (2008)^[6] corroborates our experience, stating that in the analyses and definitions of Distance Education, emphasis is placed in non-proximity (dispersive students, not being able to move so as to meet); however it is important to remember that the temporal aspect, sometimes neglected, is of extreme importance: regular and efficient contact, which facilitates satisfactory interaction favours psychological security between the students and the "teaching" institution and is crucial for student motivation, an essential condition for autonomous learning.

4- Self Learning Materials: an Invitation to Learning

The referentials suggested by the Education Ministry and the theoreticians who are concerned with the elaboration of material for Distance Education associate autonomy to the learner, as is evident in the following fragments: "[...] there is always a possibility of reformulation of catalyst contents that improve **autonomous learning** associated to experience"^[7]; "[...] an **autonomous and independent** learner, more responsible for the learning process and willing to self learn"^[8].

But classifying the student as autonomous does not mean that he is solely responsible for his learning. The study materials must cooperate, promote, aid, and improve learning. Thus, we understand that the self learning materials:

[...] be pedagogically different from the materials used in presential education (teacher-student) and, naturally, much different from scientific documents. The difference begins in the treatment of the contents that are used in the educational act. In other words: the thematic will be valid as long as it contributes to trigger off an educational process. Information is not important in itself, but as information that is pedagogically mediated.^[9]

From the orientation proposed by Gutierrez and Prieto, the multidisciplinary team, in accordance to the institution's conception of Distance Education, has recovered the idea of treating the content, which is not an easy task when the final aim is the learning and teaching process, the approximation and the dialogue with the student. The UNIASSELVI multidisciplinary team's experience has revealed that, even after a careful training process of teachers-authors and content revisers holders of adequate titles (masters and doctors), with knowledge in the field of the course, the elaboration of materials for the course is a challenge, which has however yielded good results.

Thus this and other difficulties that the multidisciplinary team had already experienced in the monitoring of Distance Education undergraduate materials at UNIASSELVI have led to the creation of the **Didactic Principles for the Elaboration of Self Learning Materials in Distance Education**, as one of the programme's first guiding documents, whose function is to explain and give examples of the referentials for the elaboration of self learning materials to the teachers-authors.

Among the requirements established in this work, the initial difficulty the teacher-author experiences when trying to place himself in the other' position, performing an exercise of dialogue with the student and showing this approach in the materials was noticed. Until reaching the stage of perceiving the student as an interlocutor, the teacher-author follows a long path, aided by the teacher-proofreader and the multidisciplinary team, responsible for keeping the standards of quality in the self learning materials of the UNIASSELVI post-graduation programme.

This initial difficulty faced by the teachers-authors in producing materials marked by dialogical, interdiscursive and bidirectional communication can possibly be attributed to their previous experience, frequently related to publications in scientific journals, where the writing is marked by impartiality and rigorous scientific nomenclature, among other aspects.

Thus the multidisciplinary team's follow up work in the elaboration of self learning materials has been that of orientation and emphasis to the author-teacher that his target public is a reader who is undergoing a formation process and whose learning has to be worked from and along the reading text, hence the constant reminder that we need to write for a subject "[...] understanding him insofar as he is undivided and builds knowledge using feelings, reason and intuition"^[10]. As a result, it is clear that for the specifications of distance teaching and learning, the student cannot be considered as a mere spectator. In these materials, there must be concession to the learner, his previous knowledge, his experiences "[...] with the aim of making the educational act possible within the horizon of an education conceived as participation, creativity, expressivity and relationality"^[11]. It is not possible that the reader - student - continues reading the material when his hypotheses, doubts, previous readings are not considered. After all, on the other side of the self learning materials, the student rewrites the text from his models and conceptions and evaluates them receptively, as shown in the results of the institutional evaluation, when dialogic, interdiscursive and bidirectional communications are assessed (characteristics that invite the student to participate).

5- Final Considerations

To sum up, three aspects have marked the actions developed in the UNIASSELVI distance education post-graduation course: the definition, from the institution's guiding principles, of the characteristics of learning in the distance education post-graduation course is based on knowledge, autonomy, interactivity and cooperation; the establishment of semi-presential and online learning models, with the former becoming a differential since the initial expectation was that the online mode would be more welcome by the students;

and the orientations and follow up of the elaboration of the course's self learning didactic materials.

These aspects indicate the multidisciplinary team's first pedagogical and administrative experience in the introduction of the UNIASSELVI distance education post-graduation programme. It is worth emphasizing that this experience illustrates team work with transdisciplinary characteristics in which the subject matters were discussed and debated by all involved in the process, for we believe that dialogue and cooperation can yield and are yielding excellent results.

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