

PEDAGOGY ACTIONS IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (VLE): INTERACTIVITY vs. WITHDRAWAL

ANÁPOLIS – GO - Abril 2010

Celso Pinto Soares Júnior

SESI – Regional Department of Goiás

celso.sesi@sistemafieg.org.br

Ariana Ramos Massensini

SESI/SENAI – Regional Department of Goiás

ariana.senai@sistemafieg.org.br

Cristiane do Reis Brandão Neves

SENAI – Regional Department of Goiás

cristiane.senai@sistemafieg.org.br

Category: Research and assessing

Educational Section: General continuing education

Text type: Research report

Research method: Scientific Investigation

Abstract

The high withdrawal rates in Distance Education have been a critical issue among scholars, tutors and students involved in it somehow. The present research aimed to collect information from former Distance Education students who have withdrawn of any of the Continuing Education programs offered by a branch of SESI, regional department of Goiás, and reveals that the issues which justify students' withdrawal are not related to the modality, but to the withdrawing student himself. The investigation also shows the importance of student participation, along with their course's staff, in building their virtual learning environments, as well as in bringing about relevant discussions and issues to be mentioned throughout their pedagogical process.

Key words: withdrawal; distance education; pedagogical actions.

1- Introduction

Distance Education has been working as an alternative to make education more accessible since the nineteenth century. Though this modality of education makes interrelations between sender and receiver harder to be established and presents reasonably high withdrawal rates, it has been spread all over the world due to the necessity to supply the increasing amount of people seeking for initial or further formation, so that they get more chances to compete for a job (Almeida, 2010). Distance Education does not play only an important social role, since it helps education reach out to more and more people. It also helps professionals from different areas with their qualification and updating, besides providing further formation and constant qualification in new occupations and professions. However, there is a pertinent issue in most Distance Education programs, which is withdrawal - when a student quits the course in any of its stages (Favero & Franco, 2006).

There are many different reasons which may lead students to withdraw from a Distance Education program: lack of time to do assignments, many hours of work, family issues, lack of familiarity with the technology used, unavailability of places with Internet, lack of interactivity (Jensen & Almeida, 2009). Distance Education, on the other hand, has been again developing an important role when it allows access to information and to new technology, besides providing significant changes in learning environments. If changes in time and space increase the number of traditional possibilities in the educational context, access to information by itself is not enough for the educational process to happen. Communicative interaction between students and the program's managing staff is what it takes for the teaching-learning process to be successful (Mendonça, 2009).

According to Decree no. 5622 of December 19. 2005, article 1, Distance Education may be defined as an educational modality in which didactic and pedagogical mediation in the teaching-learning process occur by technological means of information and communication, with students and teachers developing activities in a variable time or space. Pedagogical mediation happens by constant recreation of approaches during the realization of a course, parting from the interrelation among materials, activities and

interactions, being the latter the act of sharing production, experiences and reflections among the participants. It gives them the opportunity to give and receive feedback on one another's actions and thoughts, which can be explicit in any of the different spaces within the virtual environment. The available tools in the virtual environment are not only a means of making the course happen, but they also may - and must - be incorporated into the different approaches in pedagogical mediation. This integration, therefore, allows the reformulation of interventions in the teaching-learning process, highlighting typical aspects of Distance Education, which empower a new way of teaching and learning (Prado, 2010).

Tutoring plays an important role in student motivation during the teaching-learning process. Teacher learn with the available material; however, learning takes place collaboratively through the interchange between learners and tutors, learners and other learners, tutors and learners and so on. Everybody learns and teaches through the dynamic process of Distance Education (Silva, 2009). The interactions settled within the virtual environment have shown evidences of the importance of its quality, considering the aspects related to the new forms of relationship, communication and learning. Security, acceptance and fellowship are aspects which must be cultivated so students participate effectively throughout the course (Harasim et. al., 1995).

It is important to understand that Distance Education is not made up by an online environment with a specific amount of information available to the students. Pedagogical adequation of the content to be taught, proper methodology and a specialized educational staff to play the mediation between students and knowledge are necessary. In online courses, student-teacher interaction is considered as an essential factor to achieve effectiveness in the teaching-learning process. In this type of course, communication happens through computer using the following means: chat rooms, forums, news boards and e-mail (Fernandes, 2009). By interacting, learners play an active role in the teaching-learning process, thus letting them express their opinions and discuss about the selected content. Thus, this modality provides learners the continuity and the sharing of experiences acquired so far in their lives, besides letting them feel they actually take part of the process as a whole.

Nowadays, Distance Education has become an important tool for Continuing Education. Due to the constant changes and modernization which have been taking place in the different sections in the work field, Continuing Education has become an essential issue, since it enhances employability and increases students' work possibilities, especially industry workers and its dependants, which are the focus of SESI Goiás' actions.

The Industry Social Service (in Portuguese, Serviço Social da indústria - SESI) / Regional Department of Goiás (RD/GO) has invested in Continuing Education courses through the Distance Education modality, which are offered for free through the virtual environment: SESI Educa – Web Ensino SESI platform – National Department and certificates by the local regional departments. The length of the programs offered range from 14 to 40 hours and are presented through Flash visual programming. The programs are followed by a crew formed by: Management, Distance Education Coordination, pedagogical coordination, monitor and tutor. It is worth highlighting that tutor supervision occurs only in the courses which are 26-hour long or over (Basic Informatics - Windows, Word and Power Point, Geography/History, Portuguese: New Orthography Rules). Pedagogical mediation is under the monitor and the tutor's responsibility: the former's duty is to make student access easier by solving doubts about VLE navigability - through electronic means, telephone or even personally, if it is of the student's interest -, whereas the latter's is to clear doubts about the content of the course program through the mailbox, besides being present in the chat rooms.

The aim of this investigation is to analyze the profile of the students who have dropped out from any of the courses of Continuing Education via Distance Education offered by SESI-DR/GO in one of its branches - Centro de Atividades (CAT) Gilson Alves de Souza, in Anápolis, GO -, to identify the reasons for students to withdraw and to take account of students' position towards the didactic and pedagogical actions performed throughout the course.

2-Methodology

The students who took part in this research are those who started a Distance Education program with the presence of a tutor but withdrew at some

point. The research was optional and the participants, unidentified. The data was collected through an objective questionnaire, created for this research's purpose, which was sent through electronic means after the end of the course to the withdrawing students. The data analysis started once the questionnaires were answered and handed back, and based on the data in them. 61 withdrawing students out of 373 subscribed in the courses offered from September to December, 2009, were interviewed. As for the students who concluded the course, a poll was created within the virtual environment so they could assess the effectiveness of the didactic and pedagogical actions.

3- Results and discussion

Out of 373 signed students total, 31 failed the course (8 per cent) and 61 quit, which represents a percentage of 16 per cent. It is worth noticing that this percentage of withdrawal, in which one of the courses was responsible for 7 per cent, might have been caused by the fact that it was performed in December 2009, a period of school recess.

According to Coelho (2010), withdrawal may take place due to factors such as: the lack of the traditional face-to-face relationship between teacher and students, the lack of technical ability in computer use, the lack of a group of individuals in a concrete space and the absence of mutuality in communication, that is, difficulties in expressing ideas in a distance written communication, which disables interactivity.

Maia et. alt. (2004) figured out that withdrawal rates in extension programs which occur only through Internet are higher - around 30 per cent -, factor which may occur due to the issues already cited. According to the author, another factor which may exert high influence on this event is proper certification, which may reach a rate of 62 per cent. Though we actually offer proper certification, our programs obtained a quite low withdrawal rate if compared to the ones reported by the author.

In the survey on the social and economic profile of the withdrawing students, the results found among the 41 answered questionnaires were:

- 56 per cent of the withdrawing students are females, whereas the remaining 46 per cent are males. As for their age, it was noticed that the highest

percentage of withdrawing students occurred among those with 30 years old and over (Figure 1).

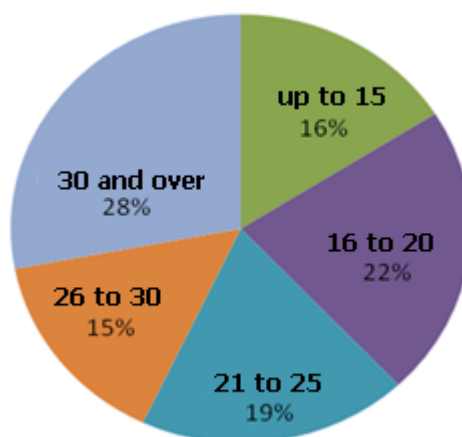


Figure 1- Survey on the age group of the withdrawing students

In the studies presented by Santos and Neto (2009), they have verified that the biggest amount of students who have withdrawn from an undergraduate program range from age 21 to 35 (40,5 per cent) and they attribute it to the fact those students have other duties besides that of studying. According to Peters (2001), students who seek for Distance Education programs go get updated, obtain more qualification or complement his/her formation may present certain particularities: bigger life and professional experience; changeable schedule organized by the student, parallel with their work, social and familiar activities; pursuit of social ascension; qualification and medium age superior to the students in regular face-to-face courses.

- When questioned about the profile of the institution where they used to or still attend Basic Education, 55 per cent come from public schools and only 11 per cent are from private ones. The remaining 34 per cent are from private schools which receive some resources from the government. 54 per cent of these students have not finished Superior Education, because either they are not aged enough or they lack opportunities to do so.

Among these students, 61 per cent claimed they have already taken other Distance Education courses and finished them successfully. 28 per cent said to have already kept in touch with such courses but withdrew in some point, and 11 per cent claimed they have never taken any courses in this

modality. It is worth noticing that only 8 per cent of these students alleged not to have access to a computer with connection to Internet at home to do the assignments. Litwin (1999) highlights the importance of making students aware of the meaning of distance studying and what the study and content of the course consist in, since most Distance Education users are not experienced in what is called the "new way of studying".

- When questioned about what has led them to subscribe in a Distance Education program, 61 per cent of the interviewed students of this research claimed they were pursuing professional improvement, 11 per cent stated they wanted to know the methodology and 28 per cent were only pursuing the certificate.

- As for the reasons why they did not conclude the course, the ones given by them were: personal problems; lack of time; difficulties in using the platform; lack of access to the Internet; ignorance about Distance Education; having subscribed in a course which was not really interesting to him/her; the course was too hard for him/her. From the alternatives just listed, 14 per cent alleged lack of time, 50 per cent alleged lack of time and 6 per cent claimed they did not have access to the Internet during the course period. This lack of time may be explained, as made explicit by Santos and Neto (2009), by other issues besides the study ones. Lima and collaborators have researched undergraduate groups and figured out that 20 per cent of the students did not conclude the course due to lack of time and tutoring (Lima and Costa, 2009).

- Though we have pointed out the reasons for withdrawing, we asked the withdrawing students if they attribute their non-conclusion of the course to the lack of tutoring from the institution's Distance Education staff and 100 per cent of them answered 'no'. Among these students, 49 per cent did not access the virtual learning environment even once, and 51 per cent did access the course, but did not carry on with it.

- According to the students who finished their courses, when they answered the poll "In your opinion, the monitoring/tutoring received throughout the course from the Distance Education staff was...", 92 per cent answered it was essential for the realization and conclusion of the course and the performance of the staff responsible for monitoring/tutoring (monitor and tutor)

was very satisfactory. On the other hand, 8 per cent answered they would take the course regardless of the presence of tutoring/monitoring.

- It is worth pointing out that different strategies - forums, polls, subjects available at the library - were applied and student participation in them were very intense, unlike the chats, in which students did not participate much. This may be due to the fact the chat room discussions occurred in scheduled time and, since students have other duties, having all students' participation was not possible.

All these interactions are up to the student to choose so he/she finishes the course. It becomes clear that VLE's must enhance social, communicative and collaborative dimensions by using pedagogical strategies which promote knowledge construction. Work in groups (Abreu, 2010), as well as the establishment of didactic and pedagogical strategies which stimulate collaborative practices - of sharing and group meaning negotiation, provided students and tutors are involved in it -, are pedagogical strategies which are able to perform a positive difference which may contribute a lot to Distance Education. There is little doubt that both teachers and tutors learn throughout the process: students learn how to be autonomous students and tutors learn how to teach autonomous students, thus learning as well (Sartori, 2010).

4-Conclusion

It is noticeable that tutoring/monitoring and attachment between students and the tutor-monitor team is of great importance for students to remain in the course and finish it. The interaction between the participants and the pedagogical staff make the former feel they are part of the teaching-learning process.

Withdrawal as a whole was pointed out by the students as a consequence of personal issues and lack of time, and they are attributed neither to any didactical or pedagogical actions nor to the material used in the courses. It is also important to point out that most withdrawing students have already experienced Distance Education before. Thus, it is noticeable that other teaching modalities, such as Adult Education and other face-to-face or distance courses, have the withdrawal issue as a reality in their everyday routines, which

makes explicit the fight against the misconception that dealing with high withdrawal rates is an issue belonging only to the Distance Education modality.

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