

# **CONTINUING TEACHER EDUCATION FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*With the expansion of distance education in Brazil, universities are investing in professional qualification for distance education, considering multiple roles which teachers are playing face to challenges of teaching-learning processes mediated by information and communication technology. Trainer teachers, tutors, pedagogical designers, creators of content are some of the functions that teachers are taking over in the dynamic context of distance education. Investing in professional qualification for distance education is a fundamental premise for quality patterns of online courses, considering the fast expansion of distance education and the need of offer of continuing teacher education program. The intention is to describe actions that involve continuing teacher education program for distance education, considering experiences from UFRPE.*

**Key words: Continuing Teacher Education; Distance Education; Professional Qualification in Distance Education**

## **1- Introduction**

For a good planning in distance education public policies it is required special attention to the teachers' qualification in the dynamic virtual learning settings. In Brazil, the number of distance education courses has clearly increased and public educational institutions need to promote continuing teacher education programs for the professionals working at distance education.

This paper aims to describe activities of planning and implementing the Continuing Teachers Education Program at the Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco (UFRPE). The article is divided in four sections. In the first part the general topic is introduced. In the second part data on the expansion of distance education in Brazil are presented. In the third part the programs of continuing education at UFRPE are described. In the fourth section it is emphasized the dynamics of qualification courses designed to teachers, and the fifth section presents conclusions with indications for further work.

## **2- The expansion of Distance Education in Brazil and the Need of Professional Qualification**

Evidence of the rapid expansion of distance education in Brazil is shown in numbers. According to ABRAEAD [2] - Brazilian Yearbook on Statistics about Distance Education and Open Education, Brazil had 2,279 million students in different distance education courses in 2006. According to ABED – Brazilian Association of Distance Education, 1,758 students were enrolled in 13 undergraduate courses in the year 2000. And in 2008 there were 1,752 undergraduate and postgraduate *lato sensu* courses, with 786,718 enrolled students.

In addition, data from census in Higher Education [ 6 ] published by Ministry of Education (MEC) confirm the expansion of distance education in Brazil. On the first semester of 2009, rates of growth were published by MEC, concerning institutions and students, with data collected in 2008. According to

these, 760,599 students were enrolled in undergraduate courses, at 145 institutions. That accounts for a growth rate from 90% to 100% a year in the expansion of distance education in Brazil.

According to Distance Education Census [6], among the courses which show the highest growth rates are those oriented to teachers' qualification (31,5%), followed by management courses (19%). These results seem to confirm a growing demand in the fields of pedagogy and teaching development, due to academic and professional low qualification of teachers who work at basic educational levels.

According to data from an exploratory study on the brazilian teacher [10], there is an increasing demand for professional training in pedagogy as a function of low skilled professional and academic teachers who work in basic education. According to that study [10] considering only basic education note that only 68.4% of teachers working in basic education have higher education, when the LDB - Law of Directives and Bases of Education had established the period until the year 2007 for teachers had the opportunity to invest in their training for teaching.

Regarding the developments in the distance education field, several difficulties arise for the management of activities in this teaching mode. A number of impediments faced by institutions which deal with distance education result from the precariousness formation of professionals working in the multidisciplinary teams in the field. In general, they are quite unfamiliar about the guidelines of planning, management, teaching, creating of materials and implementing courses.

With the emergence of the new paradigm of distance education, teachers are supposed to play multiples roles, due to the nature of the teaching and learning process, mediated by communication and information technology. These roles include online tutors and face-to-face tutors, development teachers, curricula designers, content reviewers, linguistic consultants and many more different roles.

Thus, it becomes evident the importance of teachers' roles, especially in the present scenario of social, economical, political, cultural and technological changes which highlight the importance of knowledge. A change of focus is observed, from the models of learning process in attendance to the model of

distance education, based on a collaborative and cooperative process. According Belloni [4], the main feature of distance education is the “teacher transformation of one individual entity in a collective entity”.

According to Lévy [11], this dynamic context of cyberculture promotes the occurrence of new genres and new evaluation criteria, new actors in production and treatment of knowledge. On the management of the learning processes, within the relation between pupils and knowledge, the teacher’s role moves from a face-to-face level in attendance to a virtual/collaborative level. When turning to this collaborative level, the teacher plays the part of “cheering collective intelligence”, as suggests Lévy [11], in the meaning that he organizes the stream of virtual communication, creates virtual materials to be used on line, and does several other activities he starts to develop in the process of distance learning.

Yet according to Lévy [11], the main teacher’s role cannot be the mere transmission of knowledge, which is now done by much more effective means. The teacher’s competence must then be based on fostering learning and thought. In order to take good advantage of technology, the teacher must participate actively in the cyberculture and recognize the multiple possibilities offered to students, within the endless sea of information in the cyberspace. Teaching practices must then be continuously reevaluated, on the face of all challenges in teaching development.

The teacher’s role is guided so to facilitate students’ learning tracks in virtual learning environments. The learners act directly in exchanging and cooperative building information streams, aiming at turning simple information into knowledge. This is the great challenge of education in technology era: how to teach students to learn how to learn autonomously, coming across the importance of producing knowledge from the huge amount of information at hand in cyberspace?

Given the need to invest in the continuing education of teachers for distance education, several investigations have been performed, for example, Census in Distance Education [6] which shows that 40% of the institutions have masters and doctors in the field trained specifically in distance education and more than 50% of institutions have specialists in the area.

Considering the precarious formation in teaching, the institutions have shown preoccupation about tutor roles, that is, teachers who guide students' learning in virtual environments. Investing in tutors' qualification is a requirement for the institutions to guarantee not only their programs of professional development, but also post graduation programs in the field of distance education.

Also according to Census in Distance Education [6] only about one tenth of higher education institutions have professionals with degrees toward this area and almost one third of all institutions have professionals who are majoring in distance education.

In sum, universities try to offer qualification post graduation courses, aiming at improving teachers' practices in the dynamic context of distance education. In this respect, UFRPE has developed action plans in order to offer qualification courses to teachers who work in the distance education courses of this institution, as follows.

### **3 – Professional Education Programs in Distance Education/UFRPE**

The distance education in UFRPE provides two development courses for teachers that develop their actions through distance modality.

1. Development course for tutor-teachers
2. Development course for author-teachers (pedagogical contents creators)

The courses have a total schedule of 220 hours, offered in nine learning modules. The aim of the courses is to provide professional qualification of teachers that need to develop competences for existent challenges from e-learning. The continuing teacher education program aims to contribute to professional qualification of teachers that work in e-learning, considering some

basic axes in the structure of learning modules such as: moodle setting, introduction to distance education, tutorial systems, teaching-learning process, didactics, pedagogical practices, evaluation, writing and textuality in elaboration of printed material, interdisciplinary projects, among others.

In the organization of the continuing education program it was done a selection of trainer teachers that developed didactic material for learning modules initially. After didactic material writing, trainer teachers recorded web conferences in order to guide enrolled teachers' study.

Next section, it will be described in detail the dynamic of realization of learning modules in the continuing education program.

#### **4 – Dynamics of Learning Modules: from Planning to Execution**

In the elaboration process of pedagogical contents, trainers wrote different volumes with units of learning proposed for each module. Then, it was elaborated ten hour of content for each week, organized in thematic units which would be published in volumes. The pattern of didactic material prioritized the following sections:

- a) *Let's talk about the subject?* – An initial motivation at the beginning of each chapter.
- b) *Widening horizons* – tips for researching and reading for enrolled teachers.
- c) *Projects menu* – guiding for elaboration of teaching-learning didactic projects in order to motivate teachers for evaluation of pedagogical practices in e-learning context.
- d) *Self-evaluation* – reflective activities in which teachers could be motivated to the construction of self-evaluative practices.

In didactic material, trainer teachers had already proposed activities for each week, considering synchronous and asynchronous communication tools presented in e-learning setting (moodle).

In the dynamics of execution of the modules, trainers organized work methodologically, considering the following tools:

- *Realization of a chat per week*: trainer had previously scheduled a chat with teachers so that they can debate about issues related to proposed contents from learning module.
- *Realization of a thematic forum*: trainer organized a forum per week in order to motivate teachers' participation and also evaluate this participation in an asynchronous communication process.
- *Requesting activities sending*: teachers sent their activities directly to moodle virtual setting through the link "activities sending" proposed by trainer.
- *Requesting activity in module conclusion*: trainer created an activity which aims to conclude teaching-learning process of the module.

Teachers' evaluation was done based on the construction of competences, in a formative approach of evaluation flows. Then, evaluation was done in a continuing way, based on face-to-face activities done during meetings for guiding, as well as virtual activities in e-learning settings. Thus, teacher was evaluated based on the following chart which shows concepts and percentage of evaluation process:

Concepts	Situation	Evaluation percentage
Great	Successful	90% to 100% of effectiveness
Good	Successful	80% a 89% of effectiveness
Reasonable	Successful	70% a 79% of effectiveness
Not enough yet	Failed	60% a 69% of effectiveness
Insufficient	Failed	Less than 59 %

**Chart 01- Values in evaluating process in the continuing education**

In order to register the concepts of evaluation, trainers followed as a guide the following criteria:

Activities	Value	Realization
Realization of activities proposed by trainers in e-learning setting ( <i>moodle</i> )	40,00%	Sending of activities to e-learning setting, considering quality of comment and arguments presented
Participation in face-to-face meeting	20,00%	Being present and participate actively of face-to-face meeting
Participation in e-learning setting ( <i>moodle</i> ) Self-evaluating practices	40,00%	Meaningful participation of chats, forums and other tools used by trainer; Sending of activities in e-learning setting
<b>Total</b>	<b>100,00%</b>	

**Chart 02- Evaluating criteria prioritized in the Continuing education**

As it was presented on chart 01, teacher obtained success when his concepts were: Great, good or reasonable, obeying the evaluating percentage described on the chart.

In order to compute teacher's evaluation for certification in each learning module and certification at the end of the course, it was considered the following actions:

- ✓ Meaningful participation during meetings for guiding, offered at the beginning and ending of each learning module.
- ✓ Meaningful participation through (synchronous and asynchronous) communication tools such as: chats and discussion forums.
- ✓ Realization of activities proposed in didactic material, in the virtual setting and in face-to-face meetings.
- ✓ Integration of all modules based on the teacher's success in each learning module.
- ✓ Realization and sending of every activity proposed in different learning modules.
- ✓ Quantity and quality of access to e-learning setting (*moodle*).

**Chart 03- Actions for teacher's evaluating practices**

It is possible to notice that the continuing education program prioritize formative evaluating practices in order to call teacher's attention to reevaluation of his roles face to present challenges of teaching and learning continually in the dynamic scenery of distance education.



## 5 – Final Considerations

In a general way, it was observed certain resistance by teachers in relation to participation in the continuing education program, mainly by the ones enrolled in the development course for author-teachers (pedagogical contents creators). This teachers' profile is formed by masters and doctors who were creating didactic material for development courses in distance education.

As occurs in most of continuing education program, it is necessary to conscious teachers in order to improve their professional qualification face to new challenges of distance education, what is not always an easy task. In spite of some initial obstacles, it was observed a changing in several teachers that started to revisit their pedagogic practice, reevaluating teaching-learning strategies in the universe of online education.

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