

# EXPERIENCE WITH A PLAYFUL APPROACH FOR BEGINNERS IN DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES

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## **Abstract**

*This article will describe the development of course “Studying at a distance”, elaborated by Team members Polo Classroom Support for Diadema, Program Open University of Brazil, consisting of an expecialist, two students and an Attendant Tutor of Universidade Federal Fluminense course: Planning, Implementation and management of Education at a distance. The course aims to prepare interested people in studying by distance mode for the conscious use of*

*Virtual Learning Environment ( VLE ) ensure ownership of essential tools, as much as the practical point of view as the conceptual one to stimulate the student's autonomy, provide a better performance in future courses and contribute to reduce evasion.*

*Using playful approach, the course consists of a series of games that encourage the discovery of the main tools of the VLE and provide reflections on the concept of each one of them, making analogies about real-life situations in distance learning courses of varying levels.*

*In 2010 the course was applied to a pilot class, carefully recorded, evaluated and reformed. Two more classes started in April 2011, which allows us to make notes on results.*

## **Introduction**

“Throughout the evolutionary process of education, many were learning environments: the cathedral, the monastery, the palace, until we reached the enclosed classrooms with fixed desks, which provided a strict discipline, but no interaction.” (CHERMAN & BONINI, 2000)

The use of information and communication technologies and new possibilities of distance education have changed the landscape of education, created the bases for changes in the way it is planned, organized, distributed and evaluated. According to Azevedo (2000), among the imagined and proposed various solutions, distance education is often remembered for increasing the capacity of the higher education system while maintaining the quality of education and training.

Distance education made significant advances in recent years, both in increasing the number of vacancies and the quality of the courses offered in this mode. According to the Brazilian Statistical Yearbook of Open and Distance Education, 2008, only between 2003 and 2006, the number of undergraduate of distance courses increased by 571% and enrollment increased 400%. The quality of the courses could be proven in Enade / MEC, where 13 areas that one can compare students of regular education with those of distance education it was

verified that students in seven areas of distance learning courses were better than those in regular courses.

The implementation of the Open University of Brazil contributes significantly to this data, for the courses in Public Institutions of Higher Education (IPES) are offered in distance mode for free for more than 700 poles across the country (DED / CAPES) . Only in the municipality of Diadema more than 700 people are enrolled in courses of 7 IPES.

But to ensure access, retention and use for an audience that did not appropriate the use of technological resources and was formed in classroom teaching, it is still a challenge that involves measures to consider this time of transition. In addition, other factors such as fear of the unknown, distorted conception of distance education, difficulty in adapting to the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), remove potential students or contribute to the increase in the dropout rate in distance learning courses. According to Mercado (2009), unrealistic expectations are created in online education, so that the teacher who has no skills with these resources presents difficulties at the interfaces in the group work. Busy and with little time to study did not adapt to new learning situations.

To promote, include and ensure the quality of the studies in this mode, the UAB team Polo Diadema developed the course "distance learning" having as target people who have never done the distance learning course or dropped out because of difficulties with the AVA. The course is given primarily to teachers of Diadema Municipal, with support from the city Department of Education.

The choice of ludic methodology was aimed to provide the student with an environment where he could experience the dynamics of a distance course with tasks, forums, chats, tutorials, handouts, among others, but focused on exploiting the virtual environment for each new proposed game. "Learning goes much further than storing content. Implies try, experience, function and context to the different formal content or otherwise, that are presented within a school setting and through the inter-human relationships "(SALVADOR, 2007, p. 249).

By using games and play in this course as a learning resource, we offer important considerations for the group, related to skills, attitudes and information that a person should have to choose to do a course in this mode. Each game has a kind of analogy to the situation experienced in distance learning courses.

Games can become effective instructional tools, as they entertain and motivate, facilitating learning, it increases the retention capacity of what was taught. In addition, the game activates and develops the cognitive structures of the brain, facilitating the development of new skills as to observe and identify, compare and classify, conceptualize, make relations and infer, besides of developing the creativity, perseverance and sociability. (HAGUENAU et al, 2007).

In this sense Botelho (2004) points out that games can be used with various intentions: [...] for operational skills training, awareness and motivational enhancement, development of insight and awareness, training in communication and cooperation, integration and practical application of concepts learned, and even assessment (assessment of learning).

The virtual environment used for the distance part of the course was the MOODLE. The choice of Learning Management System (LMS) was founded on his popularity (6 of 7 partner Universities Polo use this environment), the fact of being a free software and experience of team members with this AVA. The environment can be accessed through the URL: <http://uabdiadema.com.br/moodle/>

### **Methodology – Playing for learning to discover**

The course "distance learning" is semi-presence, composed of five meetings held at the Polo Support of Diadema, where activities are proposed to stimulate the discovery of the tools work and reflection on ways to use them consistently. For each tool exploited a new activity is proposed to be held remotely in a virtual learning environment Moodle, which incorporates the concepts seen in class attendance.

We approached the most used tools in AVA and situations that often cause difficulties to the student of distance learning courses, such as profile

modification, password recovery, upload images, access the report notes, confirmation of performing tasks, chat, forum , direct message, informal settings, tool for sending single file, simple text tool and questionnaire. Each tool or situation was contextualized with debates, supplementary texts and links to other sites and AVA. We addressed issues as the importance of correct completion profile for the humanization of the environment, appropriate locations to be used for certain types of questions, appropriate posture and language, organization, discipline and autonomy.

The activities consist of games designed to stimulate the discovery through the exploration and practice. Thus, the aim is to enable students to consciously explore the tools of the courses they will enroll, with a critical eye and focused on the design and functionality of the tool, regardless of design or location of an AVA.

Each week new tools and resources are inserted for the student can take ownership gradually, avoiding the information overload will intimidate him.

The contents are divided into modules that contains a description of activities to be undertaken, guidelines, objectives, tutorials in various media, information, texts to deepen and deadlines for the completion of activities.

Various means of communication between students and tutors are available, such as: Forum questions, direct message to the tutor, duty of care by phone and in person.

The classroom and distance monitoring are performed by two tutors.

The interaction with students is done through a character named "Super Tutor", whose function is to assist them in the distance task.

Another character, called "Super Villain" was created with the intention of generating some difficulties during the course, with the goal of creating problem situations so that students develop skills to solve them.

All students received printed material, which was also developed by the team, consisting of various games such as puzzles, gaps, associations, and fields for the student to make notes of important information, reflect, remember and test his knowledge. This material is designed so as to be built along the way and only at the end, turns into a tutorial.

An informal environment, titled "Virtual Cafeteria" was created to encourage group interaction online.

Conversation groups are held at the beginning of all classroom meetings where students present their difficult tasks in the distance, take questions and give suggestions.

### **Details of activities**

**Modify Profile** - The first meeting of the students they filled out a profile and inserted the picture, being told to write features that they would like their colleagues know about them. The dynamic performance was connected with this activity, where each student presented, according the description of the prefile, the colleague who was just below his name in the "participants" of the platform. In this activity students could realize the importance of completing the appropriate profile in a distance learning course, thus creating a more humane environment. The activity at a distance consisted in a new game, where the student had to modify his profile again, inserting the image and the characteristics of a character of his choice. In addition to the practical exercise, the "avatar" served to disinhibit the most timid and enhance their participation.

**Direct Message** - The students received a welcome message from Super Tutor and learned how to answer it. During the week, Super Tutor continued to send messages with new commands and guidelines.

**Chat** - The joke here was proposed a bingo, the students accessed the chat room as avatars. The game was to unlock the characters by asking questions about the characteristics of the partner and giving clues about themselves. When someone got it right had to speak the word bingo. Gradually,

and with guidance from tutors, students were figuring out how to address to the colleagues

**Forum** - The forum was the resource more carefully explored. Initially the students were invited to participate in the forum "Virtual Cafeteria", an informal space for the free posting of comments. Tutors assisted in taking ownership of the tool doubts.

In a second stage, still schoolroom meeting, it was proposed a puzzle, where students need to ask the tutor to get the answer. After the discovery it was said about the importance of paying attention to all the participants were saying to make meaningful comments, that would add to the discussion. The online task was to unveil a new puzzle that was proposed in a simple forum. Images were inserted by the tutor to stimulate discussion.

In a new activity at a distance, it was created a forum which had in the script a conversation between three characters. Each post had inadequate postures such as sizes and colors that impair the viewing, too long comments, with little content, inappropriate language by excessive formality or informality, replicas without argument or out of context. Students commented on these posts and discussed the consequence of these errors. They were then asked to write a manual on the forums with the synthesis printed material of the discussions.

In a last approach of this tool was explored the possibility of creating threads in a forum. There was a discussion about the differences between to answer a topic and creates it. Then it was proposed that each student create a topic, with a controversial issue, with divergent points on the subject and asked that he managed this topic during the week, answering the questions of other students and encouraging discussion. It was also requested that an image or text to be inserted to illustrate it or promote reflection.

**Database** - In this activity students were asked to transcribe the manual on forum of the printed material into digital files, save and upload. After that they visited and commented on the tasks of colleagues.

**Task of single-file upload** - first it was presented the video "Confessions of an evaded," created by the team and inspired by the text of the same name, which has so satirical, the story of a person who enrolls in a distance learning course, but for some reason, can not finish it. After a discussion, students write advice to the protagonist of the story so that she succeeds in a new venture.

**Access the report and feedback from the tutor notes** - when undertaking a proposed activity in the classroom, a Super Villain invades the system and gives a zero for all. Together with the tutors, the students were finding out where the note and comment had been posted.

**Password Recovery** - The game proposal was the kidnapping of the Super Tutor by the Super Villain, which had already invaded the system a few days before. This villain also stole the passwords of all students, to ruin the course. To "rescue" The Super Tutor students had to discover, through clues, how to recover the passwords and re-access the environment.

**Questionnaire** - Students answered a questionnaire with questions related to course content, but with results that are very unusual and humorous feedback. In exploring the answers, they knew the functions of the buttons "save without submitting" and "submit all and finish".

**Confirmation of tasks fulfillment** - All experiences promoted during the course, which were sending tasks, were accompanied by practices on how to save a file (location, filter, file name) and see if the task was actually sent.

## **Conclusion**

Besides the references that prove the efficacy of ludic methodology in education, many students' own testimony, recorded through the records in their log books or video recordings pointed to the correctness of the choice of this methodology to adequately meet a public with this profile and achieve the proposed objectives for the course.

The play allowed the students: more freedom to expose their difficulties: "The teaching that you used served to accommodate, facilitate and



made this more enjoyable learning, and also made it easier to speak of the difficulties" (report of the student Bergvânia Lima).

It enabled a dynamic environment that encouraged the participation: "I learned all this here in a course with dynamic, fun and entertainment, I believe that every course should be like this, we feel more motivated to participate than in other courses that are often boring" (reporting of student Marcia Franco).

It was created conditions that facilitated the assimilation of the topics covered: "The games helped very much and it was much easier to learn, even because they are linked to the content worked. When you make this parallel, when the play is linked to the content, it becomes easier to assimilate. "(Report of student Maria Paula Moschen).

Even when dealing with an adult audience the fun and games were seen by students as something positive, because the objectives were clear: "The motivation increases and in my case, the "trauma" that had developed around the distance education has eroded. Tutors are to be congratulated because through "play": teach and entertain without, however, infantilize students. I believe that playing makes learning independent of any subject taught and who is taught "(report of student Ana Maria Drewnick).

The recording of this experience has the modest intention of helping other people interested in new researches and other projects, using a playful approach in distance learning adult public. Although some reports result and articles show significant results, publications on the subject are still scarce.

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