

THE PERCEPTION OF TUTORS ABOUT THE SOCRATIC FORUM IN ONLINE COURSES

Guarapuava – PR – May 2012

Elenise M. Araujo – USP – Engineering School in São Carlos – S.P.

Michele Tupich – UNICENTRO – State University in the Middle West of Parana.

Category: Methods and Technologies
Educational Sector: University Education
Makro Classification: D, Meso: H, Micro: M
Nature: Research Report
Group: New Experiment

SUMMARY

The educational system has been gradually changing the strategies of the teaching – learning and adapting the didactic traditional procedures to the technological tools supplied by virtual environments of learning. Among these strategies we point out the online forum which integrate the dynamics of communication lead by computer to the purpose of generating greater interaction in the content/pupil/tutor. It is related in that research the use of Socratic questioning presented by Araujo, Medeiros and Santos (2011) to reach the development of the critical thought of pupils. To validate this model, a research of quality was realized by the tutors of the state of Parana who were responsible for the forums during two execution of an improvement course in EAD in the year of 2011 and 2012. The consulted tutors revealed that the method is a recognized and a positive strategy to encourage the pupils in the forums and to promote skills such as negotiation and the critical thought, for it stimulates the exchange of experiences between pupils/pupils and pupils/tutors.

Key Words: Discussion forums; Tutor-didactic behaviuor; Educational Strategies in dialogue; Socratic forum.

1 INTRODUCTION

The information systems that represent the virtual environments of learning are more than resources or strategic tools for the instructional practice, for they contribute in the process of interaction and exchange of knowledge and experiences among content, pupil, teacher/tutor.

The process of teaching – learning using techniques, motivated and adequate strategies, supplies subsidies so that daily stimulus be gradually presented to the pupils and they may see the progress and greater performance of their knowledge.

Learning is an activity inherently social and the dialogue is cooperative thus allowing the participants to experiment the similarities and differences, valuing the application perspectives in problem solving.

In this sense we point out the characteristics of dialog of the forums of discussion in at distance courses, they fulfill the purpose of urging the collective learning and the development of the critical and creative thinking of community of the learning. The objective of such research is to get to know the perception of the tutor about the relevance of the dynamics of the Socratic discussion and the main contribution challenges for the realization of this method in online courses.

2 COMMUNICATION PROCESS AND INTERACTION MOTIVATION

At distance education lead by computers Pallof and Pratt it is referred to offering the learning resources to remote pupils and it involves at distance teaching (the teacher's role in the process). At distance learning possesses some fundamental elements such as: the preparation of the teacher and the pupil, at least, for the greater part of the instruction process; the use of educational media to join the teacher and pupil and to transmit the course content; and by offering a two-way-communication between the teacher, tutor or educational agent and the pupil; the separation of the teacher and pupil in time and space; the volitional control (action) of the learning with the pupil, instead of the teacher.

An important interrelationship is established in the practice of education, between the tutor (who represents someone who shows the ways, and who has the function to enable and leads to the knowledge); the active subject of educational process (the pupil seeks new meanings and rebuild concepts and practice the knowledge; and the tools of the virtual environment facilitative means of learning).

According to Pallof and Pratt the recent educational theories developed in educational circles, such as the constructivism the active learning, assume that the pupils construct actively the knowledge and the meaning by means of experimentation, by exploration, by manipulation, and by a test of ideas in reality. The interaction and the feedback of other colleagues and the teacher / tutor, help them determine the exactness and patience of the ideas. This way, the group activities, simulations and the use of open questions are powerful forces in the process of online learning. The individual's contact with the culture of the environment promotes learning and arouses internal process, they develop and define the maturation. According to Pallof and Pratt ⁽⁸⁾ there are here types of motivation that collaborate with the process of the individual's maturation: the intrinsic one (that it is related to its own action); the extrinsic (that it is related to the reactions of the environment); the transcendent one (that it is related to what its action produces in other people).

That motivated intervention is investigated by Vygotsky⁽¹²⁾ who develops the concept of the ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT which is related with the difference between what the individual can realize alone and what though he can not realize alone, he is able to learn and do with the help of a more skilled person (a teacher, tutor, another colleague with greater facility in learning).

Filatro⁽⁴⁾ points out that the formation of superiors process of thinking occurs in the adjacent development zone, that is, at a distance situated between the current development level of the pupil (without orientation) and a probable development level (oriented by a teacher or a more skilled colleagues). The method of scaffolding arises from this concept which in a cognitive learning technique by which the tutor perform parts of the tasks that the pupil is not yet able to accomplish.

The concept of THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT (ZPD) in the elaboration of an instructional framework for online courses is presented by Welk ⁽¹⁴⁾ who identifies the main factors that interfere in the report of ZPD (THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT) and the strategies that the teacher or facilitator of the learning can use in leading the unsynchronous communication activities like the discussion forum.

Welk⁽¹⁴⁾ recovers the relation between the scaffolding method and the ZPD principles of Vygotsky and describes strategies that may be applied to facilitate the learning relation during an unsynchronous communication development.

Welk⁽¹⁴⁾ suggests that among the strategies of behaviour constructive principles be applied in situations of interaction has a fundamental importance in a successful instructional practice. According to the same author these strategies involve: to create a conflict or motivation promoting the thinking and reflection; to elaborate questions and exercises that require greater advance in performing the learning in ZPD; to summarize paragraphs or topics that may complete the forum discussions and collaborate with the evolution of the adjacent development means (email) to give a weekly report; to feedback to encourage the interactions with the pupils; to use questioning techniques to get answers directed to the foreseen knowledge in the objectives.

3 EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION OF TUTTORS IN SOCRATIC FORUMS

The interaction, necessary to educational projects, ruled by cooperative learning is supported by internet courses, so it makes many computational tools available to execute the communication and participation in the process of construction of the knowledge and of the information as it is the case of discussion forums led by the teachers / tutors.

The preparation of the virtual learning environment also depends on the teacher / tutor, his motivation, time available, access, facility of each pupil. As Bem et al ⁽²⁾ state that “in the educational scope, listening understanding, and putting oneself in the place of others are essential attitudes of the communication process.

The degrees of the expectation and of the influence are different from one person to another. According to authors, some people communicate well in virtual, other do not. Some are quick in writing and in reasoning other are not. Some try to monopolize the communication (being present) others are just observers. So, it is important to use several analytical apparatus to encourage he participation the more passive pupils thus organizing the sequence of the discussions. On this focus, the studies^{(3) - (6) - (10) - (11) - (13) -(15)} and ⁽¹⁶⁾ point to the

use of strategies of dialoguing and of Socratic questioning with the purpose of involving the pupils in online discussions, and leading them to link their thinking on the explained themes, answering questions and in explaining their private position.

Paul⁽⁹⁾ recommended the taxonomy for the dynamics of the Socratic questioning by which they are incited in leading the pupils to excellency of the critical thinking, encouraging them their ideas in its veracity and in its depth. The Socratic questions, are made up of six type, or groups of questions and sub-divided in: 1-the main question, 2-clearing up, 3-suppositions, 4-view points, 5-implication, 6-evidences. These categories are described by Araujo, Medeiros and Santos⁽¹⁾ who apply this method of Socratic questioning as structural model of the discussion forums in online courses.

3.1 CONTEXT

The Improvement Course in at Distance Continental Education of UAB – UNICENTRO / Parana offered in at distance modality, was structured in thematic modules and sub-divided in seven subjects in virtual environment. The total hours of the course was fixed in 180 hours, so being 172 hours at distance and 8 hours present at the headquarters of UAB – UNICENTRO in Guarapuava / PR. The protocol of the forum organization using the Socratic questioning method was applied in two subject of this course (= Virtual Environment Learning) and Public Politics in EAD (at distance education) in the period of 2011 and 2012. For instruction and training of this protocol in 2011 a formation course was realized for the support of at distance activities. During this course at distance activities were offered as well as presence at meetings and the scheduled content was divided in five modules thus composed: Module 1- Taken for granted activities for at distance education (EAD) introduction; Module 2- Quality reference for EAD (discussion of rules of the Education Ministry – State University of Education at distance); Module 3- Being Tutor-educator (competences, skills and attitudes of the tutor); Module 4- Kinds of feedback and behaviour of tutors (Socratic method of interaction dialectic and procratic questions) also including the protocol of the organization and evaluating rubric of the forum's messages; Module 5- Cases (exercises and

practicing and practicing of the Socratic questioning in forum in the moodle) and Module 6- The course evaluation and self evaluation of the tutor.

Besides the training, the tutors participate of daily internal discussion forums for clearing up doubts and adjustments to the procedures and for proposed evaluation criteria. Araujo, Medeiros and Santos have presented results of applying this Socratic forum model in two disciplines of the improvement Course in EAD (education at distance) – Public Politics in EAD and in Virtual Environment Learning – he explains details on recommended behaviour to the tutors during such educational intervention.

4 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative survey was proposed to investigate the perception of the tutors on the Socratic method and a questionnaire was used with open questions addressed by email. The group of tutors was constituted of 4 tutors who participated in the formation course in 2011 and 4 tutors who entered the group in 2012, so being two of them received training by skype and two had already known the method as pupils in an improvement course for tutors in 2011. Only one tutor did not answer the questionnaire.

The questions were structured in a way to search the conscience of the tutors on the principles of the Socratic method of which the objective is to lead the pupil to a critical thinking and to evaluate the ideas in its veracity and depth. The questionnaire also aimed at measuring the strong points and the difficulties found by the tutors on the method's daily practice, as much as the understanding on the relationship of the adopted strategy in dialogue, exchanging ideas in the process teaching-learning as a whole. The questions sent were: Q.1- Are the Socratic method encourage the formation of a critical thinking in face of approached situations? Q.2- Does the method promote greater interaction between the tutor and pupil supporting the process teaching-learning? Q.3- Do the instruments used evaluate the knowledge on the contents of the discipline? Q.4- What are the greatest difficulties for the use of the method? What are the strong points of the method?

As far as the content analysis of the answers the indexation method and an analysis of the concepts suggested by Lancaster⁽⁷⁾ and Foskett⁽⁵⁾ , so that

the main themes and subjects approached are identified by the tutors in each answer. These concepts were united by similarity and tabulated in a board, see number 1 board which indicates the frequency of the answer in the analysed group.

Board 1 – Perception of the tutors about the Socratic forum model

	Answers	Frequency
Q1- Encouragement to critical thinking	Personal opinions even in disagreement complement and read to construction of the knowledge.	4
	Method encourages the capacity of reasoning and the critical conscience of pupils in face of situations.	2
	The method is efficacious when there is motivation and reciprocity between tutor / teacher and pupil.	1
Q2- Interaction pupil/ tutor	Dynamics encourage professional growth pupil / tutor	1
	Method promotes dialog reflexion, problem identification creating more knowledge.	2
	It causes motivation.	2
	Doubts are solved help pupil find own opinion.	1
	Tutor is main actor – must show initiative.	1
Q3- Method as an evaluation tool of content	Pupils do not read recommended texts harming evaluation.	3
	Pupils assume another people's citation and answer in a subjective and a vague way.	1
	Method evaluates better the pupil's performance, since it checks the commitment, content interest and problem identification.	3
Q4- Difficulties of Socratic Questioning method	Pupils complain that questions look alike because they deal with the same subject.	1
	Pupils argue that there is lack of time to participate of all questions thrown out.	1
	Pupils do not like to answer questions under pressure.	1
	Pupils are used to give "ready" and superficial answers without showing any critical sense.	1
	Pupils do not read the references text and instructions before the forums.	1
	Tutor has difficulty in catching the attention of pupils and must be carefull in order to avoid being misinterpreted.	2
Q5- Method's strong point	To know the pupil's opinion and their interests.	2
	Promote grater quality in online discussions.	1
	Promote greater interactions between pupil/ tutor and pupil/ pupil.	2
	Encourage the individual search of learning.	1
	The forum organization makes it easier interaction understanding in a constructive way.	1

4.1 DATA ANALYSIS

About the contribution questioning model to encourage the critical thinking the tutors have showed that they believe the method and have incorporated the dynamics with facility in the behaviour of the forums. As far as the level of interaction of the pupil and tutor in Socratic forum, the tutors also have pointed that there is a fundamental role to be performed and point out the importance of the motivation and problem identification in situations to promote a critical attitude of the pupils.

About the condition of the method Socratic questioning as a tool of evaluation, some tutors, were emphatic in affirming that the forums of such a nature require a greater commitment of the pupils to perform the recommended and give the answers with objectivity and clearness. Though, for some people, the method is the most indicated tool to measure the performance of the pupils, since it points to their level of interest and of the contribution for the collective knowledge.

The greatest difficulties of the method, the tutors point to the behaviour of the pupils it is related to disgust and accommodation. These attitude, according to them cause reasonable participations and make it difficult to manage the forums because greater effort is required of the tutor to keep or recuperate the attention of the pupils. Another important point it is the way to express with adequate words, the viewpoints and opinions in the forums. The tutor is responsible to avoid situations of stress caused by words that can lead to wrong interpretation and consequently affect the harmonious relationship in the forum.

The positive points listed by the tutors indicate that the method promotes the greatest quality of the discussions encouraging the self-learning and collective construction of the knowledge.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The online courses of Socratic forums assume an unquestionable feature and experiences already done up to this moment are motivation for the pupils to participate actively in the process of the teaching/ learning. In addition, the practice of the Socratic questioning, it is objective is to point out the foreseen content in the teaching plan and to enable the pupils to assume the responsibility on their learning. The tutor must arouse and keep the interest of

the pupil using its own questioning technique to encourage the pupil to overcome difficulties and limits. It appears that the method, despite the fact that it requires greater effort from the pupil and from the tutor, it presents an unequal structure of the online course, for it prizes the dialogue and construction of new knowledge and starts dealing with systematic problem identification in teaching situation.

It was verified in this study, that the perception of tutors about their method is positive, and other analysis must be formulated in order to validate that experiment, as we know that context and personal characteristics interfere directly in the obtained results.

It was identified also to be necessary to make a more detailed survey about the academic formation of the tutors and their conceptual perspectives about EAD and the computerized communication. These aspects are formed in changeable resolutions resulting in a positive or negative behaviour of the tutors in Socratic forum.

It is also considered that the strategies of dialoguing used in online courses depend on the tutors' effort, be lined up to the objectives of the course and the content of the subject, they execute the role of facilitator and encouraging the dialogue and the critical thinking. The same way on Socrates taught, the tutor must encourage the pupils to formulate universal truths and become conscious that the knowledge is innate and it is revealed daily in the dialectic method.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

[1] ARAUJO, E.M.; MEDEIROS, F.; SANTOS, E.M. Fóruns socráticos: um modelo para cursos online. In: CONGRESSO ABED 2011. Manaus. **Anais...** ABED: 2011. Available in: <<http://www.abed.org.br/congresso2011/cd/92.pdf>>. Access in: 02 abr. 2012.

[2] BEM, V. et al. A Interação na EAD é necessária. In: CONGRESSO INTERNACIONAL DE EDUCAÇÃO A DISTÂNCIA, 10., 2003, Porto Alegre. **Anais...** São Paulo: ABED; Porto Alegre: PUCRS. p.68.

[3] CASARIN, M. L. R. S. ; ARAUJO, E. M. ; OLIVEIRA NETO, J. D. Discussion forums: relevance lost? In: 24th ICDE World Conference is Expanding Horizons New Approaches to Open and Distance Learning ., **Proceedings..** 2011, Bali, Indonesia: Universitas Terbuka, 2011. p. 1-14.

- [4] FILATRO, A. **Design instrucional contextualizado**: educação e tecnologia. São Paulo: Ed.SENAC, 2004.
- [5] FOSKETT, A.C. **A Abordagem temática da informação**. São Paulo, Polígono: Brasília, Ed. da UnB, 1973
- [6] KENG, L.T. **Critical thinking and Socratic inquiry in the classroom 1**. 2006. Available in: <<https://www.aare.edu.au/96pap/limtk96605.txt>>.
- [7] LANCASTER, F.W. **Indexação e Resumos** : teoria e prática. Brasília, Briquet de Lemos, 1993
- [8] PALLOFF, R.M.; PRATT, K. **Construindo comunidades de aprendizagem no ciberpaço**: estratégias eficientes para a sala de aula on-line. Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2002.
- [9] PAUL, R. **Critical Thinking**: What every person needs to survive in a rapidly changing world, Rohnert Park: C.A.: Centre for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique. 1993.
- [10] POPESCU-MITROI, M.M. Bloom's taxonomy – valences and utility in pedagogical practice. **Journal Plus Education**, v.6, n.2, p. 289-300, 2010.
- [11] STRANG, K. D. How can discussion forum questions be effective in online MBA courses? **Campus-Wide Information Systems**, v. 28, n. 2, p.80 – 92, 2011.
- [12] VYGOTSKY, L.S. **Linguagem, desenvolvimento e aprendizagem**. São Paulo: Ícone, 1994.
- [13] WALKER, S. A. Socratic strategies and devil's advocacy in synchronous CMC debate. **Journal of Computer Assisted Learning**, v.20, p.172–182, 2004.
- [14] WELK, D.S. The Trainer's application of vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" to asynchronous on-line training of faculty facilitators. **Journal of Distance Learning Administration**, v.9, n.4, winter, 2006. Available in:<<http://www.westg.ed/~distance/ojctla/winter94/welk94.htm>>. Access in: 18 Nov. 2008.
- [15] YANG, Y. A catalyst for teaching critical thinking in a large university class in Taiwan: asynchronous online discussions with the facilitation of teaching assistants. **Education Tech Research Dev**, v. 56, p. 241–264, 2008.
- [16] YANG, Y.; NEWBY, T.J.; BILL, R.L. Using Socratic Questioning to Promote Critical Thinking Skills Through Asynchronous Discussion Forums in Distance Learning Environments. **American Journal of Distance Education**, v.19, n. 3, Sept. 2005, p.163 – 181.