SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION (DE) UNDER THE VISION OF BRAZILIANS FROM THE SOUTHEAST REGION

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ABSTRACT

This quali-quantitative, exploratory and field research objective to evaluate the level of understanding from Brazilians from the southeast region about the topic Distance Education (DE). This study is based on data's analysis obtained from the evocation technique on 100 respondents in order to build the social representation of distance education from the point of view of Brazilians from the southeast region. Making use of theoretical concepts previously presented to discuss distance learning, the social representation of distance education will be compared to this theory, in order to validate knowledge and identify knowledge's gaps, which may subsequently be the source of new research.

Key words: Education; education; distance education; Social representation.

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Internet and Information and Communication Telecommunications (ICT), distance education has gained ground and relevance. The expansion of distance education has revolutionized the field of education, due to the access democratization of the population's access to a variety of types of courses (LITTO and FORMIGA, 2012).

The distance education (DE) meets a learning based on stimulating student and his competences, through interactivity and group solutions with no space for the mere recording of content. It means, e a learning based on a "know-how" and not just a "knowing" (FREIRE, 1986 and LITTO and FORMIGA, 2012), which only occurs through a break from the traditional model of education (LITTO and FORMIGA, 2012).

However, there are several criticisms of the distance education model, considering it as a Taylorism concept of education, with the homogenization of the learning, similar with the image of the machines in the industrial era (PATTO, 2012). In this perspective, to Zuin (2006), distance learning is a distant education.

2. Objective

The main aim from this article is to understand how distance education is seen, recognized and understood, seeking to answer the following investigative question: What is the social representation of distance education under the vision of Brazilians from the southeast region?

There is a large growth of distance education in Brazil, especially higher education, an increase of 52.5% in the enrollments between 2011 and 2012 (ABED, 2014). In addition, there is no articles to report the social representation of distance education. Thus, it is a topic of interest.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Distance Education

For Moran (2002) and Santinello (2007), the DE is an educational method based on self-learning, where students and teachers are spatially and /or temporally separated. As for Litto and Formiga (2012), DE schooling respecting the pace of student achievement, with autonomous learning. It is considered as a complementary form or alternative to traditional education having an important role in democratization of knowledge.

Patto (2012) and Chau (1980) criticize the DE, as they believe that the face-to-face communication can never be overcome by communication through technology, since the last one down the knowledge to the lowest common denominator. To Zuin (2006) the distance education courses that were successful were those that approximate the teacher and the student, in person.

According to Tallent-Runnels (2006), there are three educational models: 1) online education - course made entirely over the Internet; 2) Traditional education (face-to-face) - course made full attendance and 3) hybrid education - partly classroom course and done over the Internet.

Bayma (2009) states that the hybrid model is ideal because: 1) replaces the lectures for online interactive materials; 2) makes use of lessons videotaped and made available via video streaming; 3) has discussion forums; 4) offers online monitoring to students; 5) supports virtual collaborative projects and 6) provides technological resources to support.

Still, according to Bayma (2009), the main advantages and disadvantages of DE are: 1) advantages: more far-reaching public; easing methods and materials catering to those with little time; 2) disadvantages: reduced exchange of experiences between student and teacher, student-student and networking. These disadvantages are being minimized by technology.

Camargo and Santos (2009) identified the existence of preconception and a negative attitude against distance education in the academic world, linking it with words like "picks" and "incomplete".

The development of ICT has revolutionized the ways of teaching and learning. The DE did emerge the need to rethink the educational model, the role of the teacher and the traditional valuation methodology (MELLO, 2014). To Valente (1993) and Neitzel (2001) technology accelerates the educational

change process, where the student controls the learning process and knowledge building.

However, Batista (2014) warns that one of the weaknesses of the use of ICT in distance learning is precisely the fact that Brazil is a poor country where most citizens have no computer, it means, there is a strong lack of access to proper infrastructure from you.

3.2 Theory of Social Representation (TRS)

According Jodelet (2001) and Alves-Mazzotti (2009) social representations are important as they seek to understand the social imaginary of the thinking and behavior of people about a particular object to be represented. According to Alves-Mazzotti (2009) social representation "*Investigates precisely how they form and how the referral systems that we use to classify people and groups, and to interpret the events of everyday reality*." (ALVES-MAZZOTTI, 2009, p. 60).

The social representation is structured from a central nucleus and its surroundings is the peripheral system (ABRIC, 2003). According to Vergara and Ferreira (2006), the core is the most important part of the social representation of an object to be represented because it reflects the perceptions of more cohesive research group. The core generates, organizes and stabilizes the entire social representation being decisive for the direction to a given object takes for a group (VERGARA and FERREIRA, 2006).

In TRS also identified the existence of a more flexible peripheral system, which revolves around the central core and that accommodates the immediacy contextual contradictions of the research group. Thus, the peripheral system is not consensual, but is flexible, allowing the adaptation of social representation to the immediate preserving the unchanging core (MARCHISOTTI, 2014).

4.   Methodological path

This article follows the principles of exploratory qualitative and quantitative research (VERGARA, 2013). Data collection was performed by means of a link to the survey, where respondents should express what five

words that came to mind when faced with "Distance Education" expression. This is the technique called evocation of words.

Regarding the type of sample, this article adopted the accessibility or convenience sample (VERGARA, 2013). SPHINX software was used as a tool for data collection and sample analysis. The survey was available for 23 days between the months of April / 2015 to May / 2015, totaling 100 respondents, which have the following profile: 1) 44.4% female and 55.6% male; 2) 91% is in the range of 25 to 55 years of age, especially in the range between 36 and 45 years (37%); 3) 91% live in the Southeast of Brazil; 4) there was a predominance of respondents whose profession was the engineer (36%); 5) 81% had at least a postgraduate degree, with 34% having master's degree; 6) 63% of respondents had made some sort of distance learning course, especially for postgraduate courses (specialization and upgrading), with 23.8%. According Moscarola (1990) and Marchisotti (2014) from 100 answers increases consistently to the rate of success of a search.

For the definition of social representation of distance education, was adopted as data processing technique the "four houses frame" technique from Pierre Verges, which exposes in a frame, the core and peripheral system elements of distance education´s social representation (VERGARA and FERREIRA, 2006) and used to support the software EVOC. This research sought to focus only on words that are part of the core.

As for the correct identification of meaning that every word found in the central nucleus of the social representation of DE, we used the responses of two open questions of the questionnaire: 1) which of the evocated words is the most important? Why? In addition, 2) Please describe using your own words what is distance education. Thus, all the answers to the above questions were analyzed via content analysis, but only from the respondent who has evoked one of the words that have been included as part of the central nucleus of the social representation of distance education. For these respondents, greater emphasis was done for the first answer, which is explicitly the thought of the interviewed about certain word of the core. Content analysis is a deductive or inferential process, developed from words or indicators (FREITAS and JANISSEK, 2000).

5.   Presentation ad Discussion of Results

By analyzing the data collected, using the EVOC software, it identified the core of social representation of distance education, namely: **Flexibility, Facility, Convenience, Practicality, Discipline, Time, Cheap, Cost, Opportunity, Internet** and **Commodity.**

The word **Flexibility** suggests that distance education is a more appropriate way to overcome the barriers imposed by the blended learning model. The DE is more flexible, since the course has no predetermined time to being made considering the student availably time, remotely and independently of a predetermined physical location. Litto and Formiga (2012) has argued that the DE schooling and respects the pace of income and autonomy of student learning. However, there are reservations about the lack of physical meetings, or to perform evaluations or to encourage interaction among students and between student and teacher. Belonni (1999) and Bayma (2009) had indicated that this was one of the disadvantages of distance education and could generate a disincentive for the student to move forward with the course.

The word **Facility**, in turn, has positive and negative connotations. The negative connotation refers to the feeling of the distance education courses are inferior from the standpoint of content and rigor. Camargo and Santos (2009) and Litto and Formiga (2012) has argued that distance education suffers from preconception over time. Considering the positive connotation, DE is described as easier to be made as it suits the availability of student time and place in your own home. The DE also facilitate access to good education, who live far from major centers. It is what Bayma (2012) warned of the possibility that distance education has to reach a greater number of students.

Already the word **Practicality** is a practical, agile and according to then plan, where the student can take a course in a scenario of shortage of time. There are reservations, however, regarding the importance of the material's quality, the communication media's quality and the tutors, who need to adjust the DE. This is the Bayma (2009) describes as one of the DE advantages, namely flexible appropriate methods of teaching materials, as well as the possibility of online tutorial.

The **Discipline** word describes the behavioral characteristics that students need to have or acquire, so that you can learn through distance

education, as personal organization and be self-taught. It comes back to what Moran (2002) and Santinello (2007) think, since for them the DE uses the self-learning process. Valente (1993) and Neitzel (2001) corroborate this understanding, because the student is controlling the learning process and the construction of their knowledge.

In turn, the word **Time** express the gain time afforded by distance education, rather than the face, since there is no physical displacement of the student to the classroom. It is mentioned also the importance of having a teacher to remove doubts and guide the student in achieving the objectives of the course, through some kind of interaction, going back to what was mentioned by Bayma (2009).

Already the word **Cheap** demonstrates one of the great gains of distance education for the student, which is the ability to take a course with the same quality of face similar but with lower costs. Meets than Litto and Formiga (2012) warned about the lower costs of distance education compared to traditional teaching keeping the quality in order to democratize access to education. The meaning idea that came from the word Cost is the same than Cheap, i.e. the DE has better value for money compared to the face-to-face method.

The word **Opportunity** associated with distance education to create opportunities for students who have difficulties in carrying out courses, for lack of either time, travel time, inability to afford higher costs or have limited financial conditions. Litto and Formiga (2012) has warned about the distance learning's transformation power, since it is responsible for the democratization of the access to education, or distance education is a social integration tool.

Already the word **Internet** is perceived as a key resource for the existence of distance education, because without it, much of the distance learning courses available today could not exist. It relates also platforms and systems involved in the content storage. Meets than Mello (2014) argues, that is, with the emergence of the internet, a new society was created, based on learning and knowledge. However, at the same time, there is a criticism of the precariousness of the network infrastructure, which does not meet the entire population and that turns out not use the potential that this type of education has. It is what Batista (2014) stated as one of the weaknesses of ICT in

distance education, as Brazil is a poor country, with much of the population without even having a computer, what to speak of the infrastructure as a whole.

Finally, the word **Commodity** gives the sense of substantially reducing the inconvenience caused in the routine of a student afforded by distance education. In this article the context, the meaning given for the commodity word is similar to the words Practicality, Flexibility and Facility, that is, these words have the same meaning.

6.   Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, it appears that the perception of Brazilians from the southeast region about distance education is **positive, but with reservations and considering assumptions to be followed.**

It follows that the reservation to the positive outlook on the DE are based on the perception that distance education is poor, lower quality, easier than classroom courses or are not as effective. These criticisms, however, did not come informed on evidences. Much of this negativity about distance education is the lack of classroom interaction between teacher and student, the alleged fragility of content and collection of this new way of teaching, supposed loss of learning to be tiring and without stimulus and even the lack of market appreciation for those who opt for this type of course. However, these negatives do not represent the expression of the vast majority being treated in this work only as exceptions.

We also conclude that, despite the positive outlook that Brazilians have of distance education, some assumptions need to be followed to guarantee that DE is effective: 1) the need to merge the DE with face-to-face meetings; 2) the DE courses must have trained teachers not giving up the interactions and 3) the material must be suitable for this type of education, as well with the media and technologies used.

Based on the evidence presented, we conclude that the hybrid model seems the most adherent to the vision of Brazilians about the DE, even if Brazilians do not they realize the existence of this type of distance education.

Considering the core elements of social representation of distance education and assumptions it was possible to develop a new definition of distance education considering the vision of Brazilians in the Southeast of Brazil:

DE is a flexible teaching model, practical, easy and comfortable for the student as it is done at a distance, within the available time, with less impact to your routine and providing time savings compared with classroom learning. It uses the internet as media and technological platforms for the transmission of content, however, always with the need for some kind of classroom interaction between student and teacher. The costs of this kind of mode are smaller, which makes it cheaper than face-to-face model. The distance education provides opportunities for students who could not afford to make a classroom course making it valuable and democratic. However, distance learning requires discipline from the student who needs to organize well and to teach yourself to fulfill your effective learning objectives. In addition, teachers need to be trained and the quality of material, compatible with this mode of education.

An import, Formiga limitation of this research it is the lack of centrality test, since according to Vergara (2013) assists in the structuring of the terms in the central core. In addition, the research was limited only to a relatively small group of respondents and mainly professionals whose educational background is engineering.

As recommendations, it is suggested that the words that are not part of the core need to be better explained as carry with them the most flexible and negotiable aspects of social representation of distance education. It is suggested also that an analysis of focus groups to identify whether there is a change of perception, considering race, gender, social status or are a teacher or student.

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