

Distance Education: Distance education: anxiety and enchantment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, firstly, we present the history of Distance Education in the world, in Brazil and, finally, in our Institution, pointing out the difficulties we went through during the implementation phase of this new course format.

Later, we will report the results of a study carried out by us, Distance Education coordinators and professors, in which we analyze mainly the difficulties encountered by the students from Language Studies and Teacher Education majors both on the Discussion Forum and on the Message Board. By verifying the most common difficulties faced by students, we will propose solutions to solve them. At the end, we could acknowledge that many students have initial difficulties while using the tools and also that those students who believed Distance Education was a vague course format, from which everybody would have a certificate dropped out eventually. . *Our practice has shown us how important Moran's (2005) words are: "The great educator attracts not only through his/her ideas, but also through personal contact. There is always something surprising and different in what he/she says, in the interpersonal relationship established, in his/her way of looking and (...)acting (...)."*

Key Words: Distance Education, Teacher Education, Interactivity, Students, Professors, Difficulties, and Advancement.

Initial Considerations

Azevedo (2007) has taught us the oldest piece of information

concerning Distance Education (DE) is an advertisement published in an 18th century Boston newspaper in which shorthand weekly lessons would be sent to students. After that, other registers trace their origin to the 19th century, around 1856 and, by the end of this century, there were formally constituted institutions for DE practice such as ICS – International Correspondence School, founded in 1891 in the United States.

In Brazil, DE began in the 20th century. Azevedo (2007) points out that in 1904 the form of correspondence education was registered, but for Saraiva (1996), DE really started in Brazil between 1922 and 1925, with Roquete Pinto and a Rio de Janeiro-based radio station called Rádio Sociedade do Rio de Janeiro. It started with cultural programs during the radio programs aiming at increasing access to education. Later, there were some records from the Brazilian Army and Navy, by the Instituto Rádio Monitor, founded in 1939, as well by the Instituto Universal Brasileiro, founded in 1941. The latter ones still exist. Other initiatives took place, such as the Projeto Minerva, in the 70's, public televisions, such as the Fundação Padre Anchieta, in São Paulo, and the Fundação Educacional Pe. Landell de Moura¹. It is worth citing the role played in education by the Telecourses, an initiative from the TV network Rede Globo supported by other three public televisions and, finally the IOB – Informações Objetivas, a service agency.

During its lifetime, the longest lasting format was Correspondence Education, highly adopted until today, making use of printed material and tutorial support offered through several means. Afterwards, the use of audio tapes, video tapes, tele-education, e-learning etc. Each of these “phases” represents improvement and efficiency in such format of Education.

Then, it can be noticed that DE is not a limited format, as long as it is student-centered:

The student is seen as a key element in this new course format which concentrates methodological resources, application of new technologies, information and communication (Azevedo, 2007, p. 10)

For this reason, it is deemed efficient the one which provides the best service, assuring permanent or continuing education, updating, and social progress.

However, due to this innovative character, teacher and student's education takes place simultaneously. In this sense, Tavares (2006, p.1) asserts:

Collaborative learning is an important process to the sharing of a common objective, and its methodology involves interaction which should break away from traditional education opening up a more innovative practice, promoting an affective relationship with knowledge, more reflective and autonomous. (...)
The teacher's job takes place with students and not about them or the teacher with him or herself (...)

In relation to its quality, it can be said that DE is the education format about which professionals should be constantly worried in terms of methodologies and ongoing improvement, undergoing several training courses, each of them geared to the model implemented in his/her institution, taking his/her time as well as the student's context.

However, the highly adopted resource is technology, which has been changing the profile of universities worldwide. There are mega-universities spreading out slowly, that is, institutions with over 100,000 enrollment, such as American corporate universities, which bring together a great number of enrollment. Corporate University Xchange Inc., for instance, has more than 4 million enrollment, made up with workers who study and train in their own workplace.

Brazilian universities should build more distance education programs, so that we could have individuals in continuing education, training workers and faculty, and the latter would be able to reproduce knowledge.

We have centered this study in this format of education which is becoming part of the Brazilian academic arena.

As coordinators and professors of Language Studies and Teaching Education majors in a Brazilian Institution for over two years, we aim at reporting the experience we have been through and the results we have achieved in this learning and educational process.

The paper is the analysis of correspondences between the students and researchers posted on the Discussion Forum and Message Board. Through the correspondences we could verify the most frequent questions and the student's global performance in relation to acquisition and development of their learning and their expression through language, so that we could better understand our clientele and be able to cope with difficulties.

The following authors underpin this study: Moran (2002, 2006); Cavalcanti (2006), Azevedo (2007) and specially Demo (2006).

DE Awakening in our Institution

We have worked in a Higher Education Institution in the capital city of the State of São Paulo in Brazil for a couple of years. In 2006, the Academic Dean invited us to participate in a division to be opened in October: the Digital Division. Not aware of it, we were informed we would start the Distance Education course format with the following majors: Business Management, Teacher Education and Work Safety. We took part in several meetings in which we were coached on material, on tools, etc.

Everyone who heard about our innovative experience made harsh criticism:

"Distance Education? If in face-to-face instruction, education has been a disaster, let alone in DE?"

Walking on thin ice, we participated in meetings, preparing the material without understanding it really well... until the training started. Training on the use of the platform in which we would insert the course content; on the web lessons, on TV, on make-up, on wardrobe, etc.

One day, we were asked to take part in a commercial recording that would be on the University TV Channel regarding the opening of our DE course format. The Institutions' authorities were present. The commercial recording was taken several times. Takes after takes ... That was a solemn occasion and it worked out fine.

In the first college entrance exam, three groups were opened in the three different majors offered. The Language Studies major and others would open in 2006.

We started our practice in this new course format and, together with the students, our learning started.

The first live lesson taught by Professor Sandra Lacerda was successful. The students enjoyed, the proud Institution's management even more.

There were around 50 students in Teacher Education. Now we have more than 2,500 enrollment. The language Studies major with concentration in Portuguese language has more than 600 students enrolled. And many other courses were implemented in the institution as it has more than 8,000 enrollment in Distance Education centers nationwide.

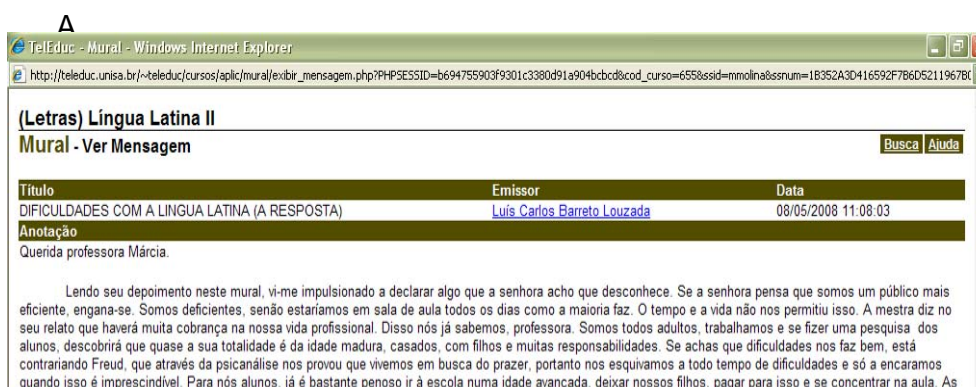
Our society has the benefit of having top quality seriously designed Higher Education, and we will explain it as follows.

In the beginning, the difficulties

Starting from scratch is not easy for anyone. Breaking paradigms built centuries ago proves much harder. And the latter existed both for the professionals and students. Both professors and students get into Distance Education thinking it is a "vague" course format, which needs no attendance and which would issue a certificate at the end, without having to demonstrate a proof of their learning. Pallof and Pratt (2004), *apud* Azevedo (*opus cit*, p. 21), alert:

It is the teacher's sole responsibility to establish the tone and start a set of participation expectations which students can respond to with a great deal of freedom, but in order to it occur efficiently, the virtual student has to be open, flexible, honest and truly have the will to take on responsibility for the community establishment and the on-line learning process.

Actually, we have found students who do not match the profile above, but these dropped out along the way once they notice how serious our work was.

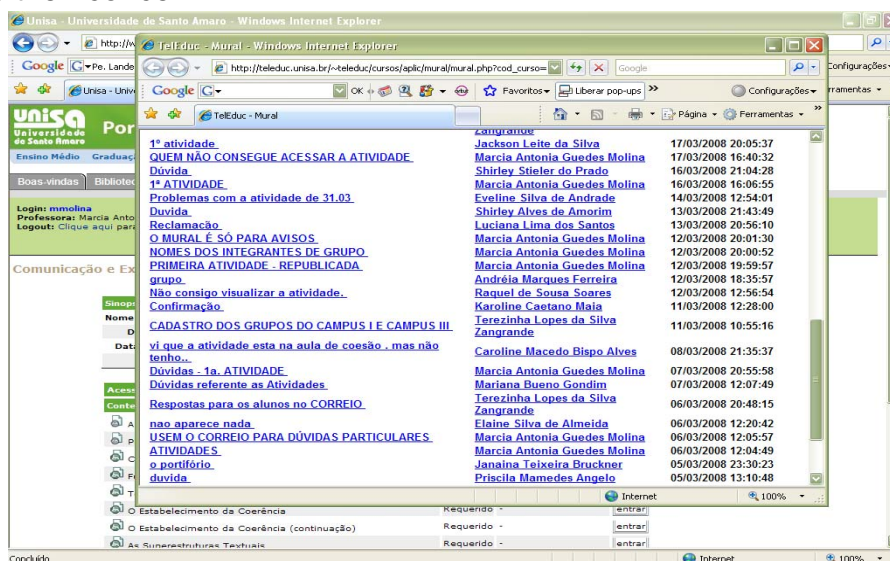


Besides this barrier, we found another: the tools we worked with. It was difficult for students to understand how it worked, and it was difficult for professors to interact with them. We were live several times to explain students

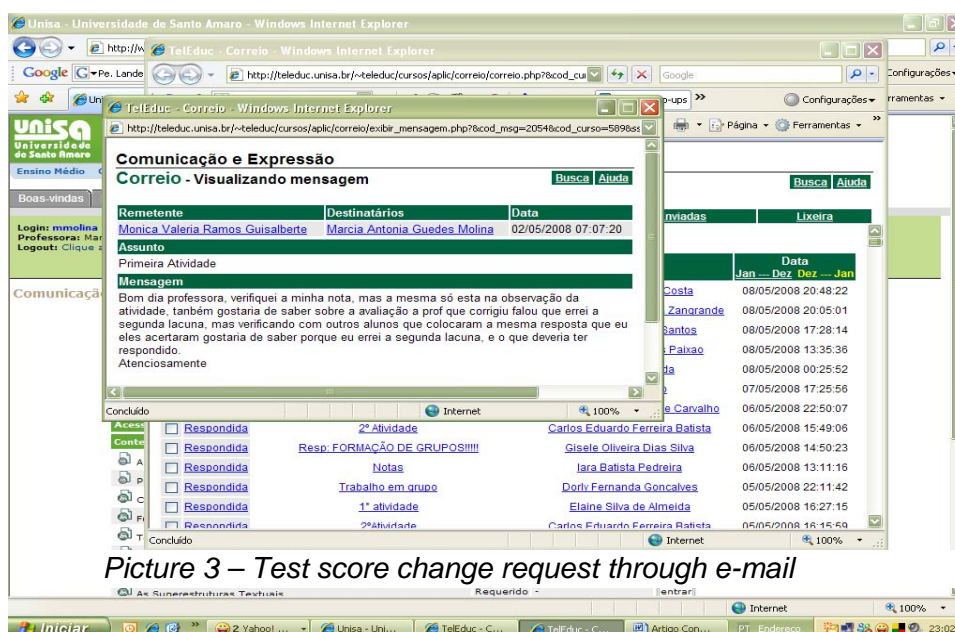
and give instructions at distance learning centers on how to access the tool, how to respond to activities, how to take part in discussion forums and chat rooms..., but students were not used to following the lessons very well, let alone the explanations.

Sometimes the tools, like any other on-line device, cracked. How many of us get worried when we have to send our IRA form over the Internet and the site is not available, or is too slow? The same happened with us one day before the due date. There were many student's grievance. These activities are a few of those we encounter on a daily basis.

See, for example, a page from the Message Board in which students express their concern:



Picture 2 – List of messages sent to the Message Board



Picture 3 – Test score change request through e-mail

grade and to write a comment on them. This meant knowledge was not being built, thus contributing to more formal grievances being filed. And the latter were

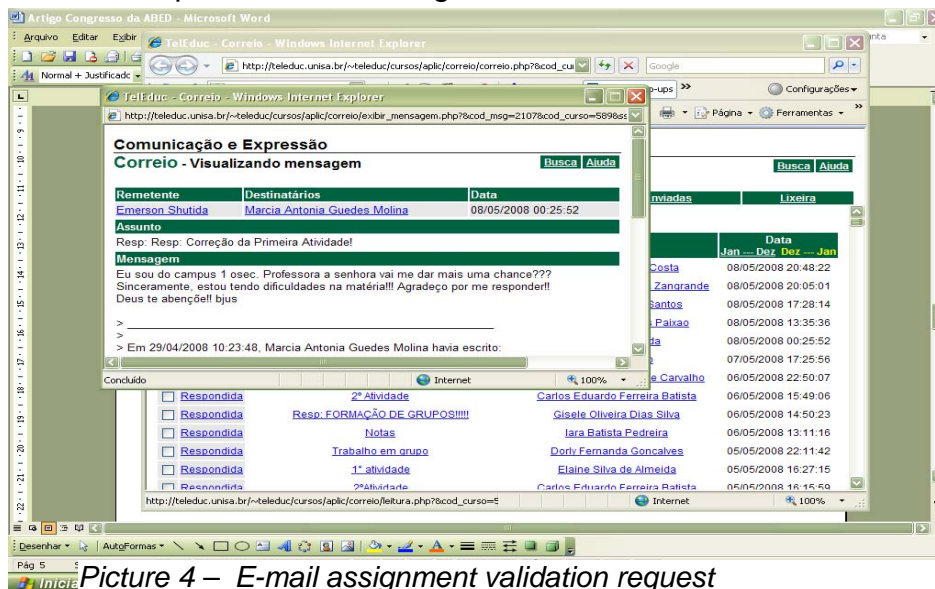
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any professors, not used to grading assignments over the Internet, forgot to

piling up.

We were faced with many grading revision which meant something should be improved. We hired an assistant who double-checked the grade's report as soon as all grades from the completed term were processed, checking if all assignments were graded, assessed and commented.

Some students did not believe the assignments would be graded, so they decided not to post them... When they noticed those assignments were part of the whole evaluation process, they wanted us to make an exception, accepting the assignments or assigning others... After all, they were not accustomed to permanent learning.



Picture 4 – E-mail assignment validation request

Demo (*opus cit.*, p. 31) provides three definitions for these terms: the first one shows that educational formal periods tend to disappear, that is, for the author learning is a lifetime process. The second is regarding a learning horizon, for instance, learning is dynamic and lasts an entire life (*idem*, p. 34); the third highlights the dialectics between what remains and what passes (*idem*, p. 36).

A lifelong learning process is still very hard for students. Too often we have had reports from Distance Learning Centers that one individual writes the final paper and the other students cheat. We have worked hard to prevent this from happening. Fortunately, the final exams are face-to-face in order to safeguard our job.

Despite our efforts, we think students will generate their knowledge, in one way or another, they will realize that not writing their papers or assignments will be harmful to them. What we have been noticing in our second year experience in Distance Education is that these problems have diminished. The reason is that specially those students who did not study and got a low grade repeated a course. This means, that, little by little, students will learn how to learn. As Vitorino (*opus cit.*, p. 65) says: students will take on their investigative role, looking for themes of their interest, studying at their own pace and time.

As years go by, another obstacle is being overcome: the Institution's

technological department has been improving with more people accessing our homepage simultaneously without getting jammed. And things are getting back to normal...

Another problem we came across in Distance Learning regards deadline for preparing and publishing course material. Our Institution offers quarterly modular courses. In this sense, once we start a new module, we have to analyze and organize material for the next one. This fact makes us serial intellectual producers which can compromise our updating with specific literature and courses in our field. This means that professionals involved with DE from head to toe, every day of the week, every time, all the time. Vacations? Surely. For catching up on reading, regarding the content being taught.

Moran (2005) alerts: A good distance learning course values not only course material prepared in advance, but how they are searched, tailored and evaluated.

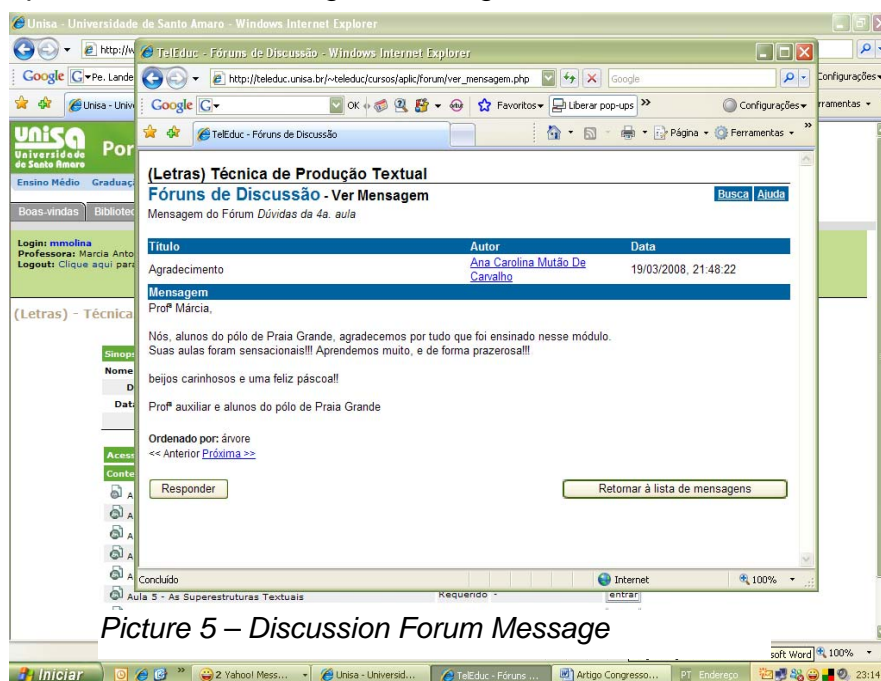
When we discuss the course material issue, we need to bear in mind that the job market requires undergraduate students to apply information, analyze situations, and be creative. Thus, every course material should be planned taking these requirements into consideration in order to develop these skills. (Vitorino, *opus cit.*, p. 69).

Finally, live lessons were an utterly tense moment for the TV staff as well as for the pedagogical staff, once we did everything live. However, the results obtained were a motivational factor to improve this educational format. We will present the positive aspects.

Now, the fruits from our labor

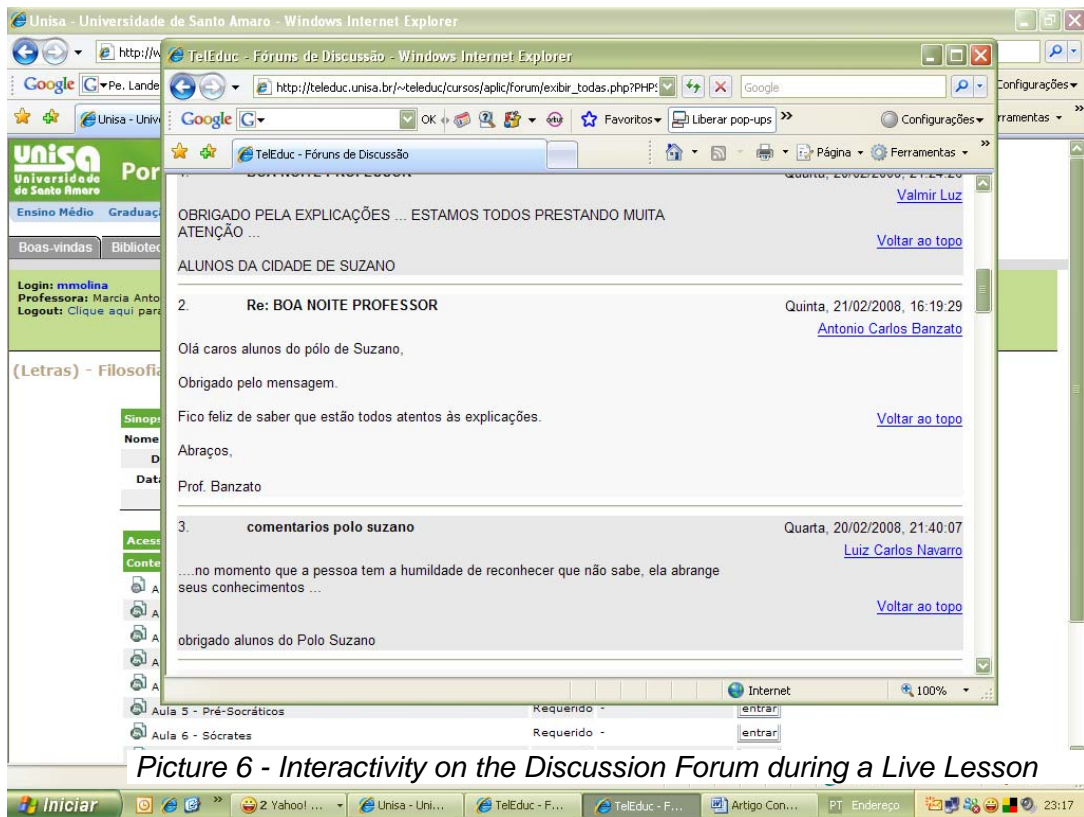
Breaking down the first barriers and having solved the initial problems, we should point out that interaction with students has been extremely rewarding.

Our students' testimonials show their improvement, their learning and their pleasure in discussing their assignments with classmates.



Picture 5 – Discussion Forum Message

When we are live, we ask for student's participation and we have an immediate response. Below, we have transcribed the Live Discussion Forum during a Philosophy Lesson, in the first module of the Language Studies major this year. Besides the compliments we have received, we can notice a high

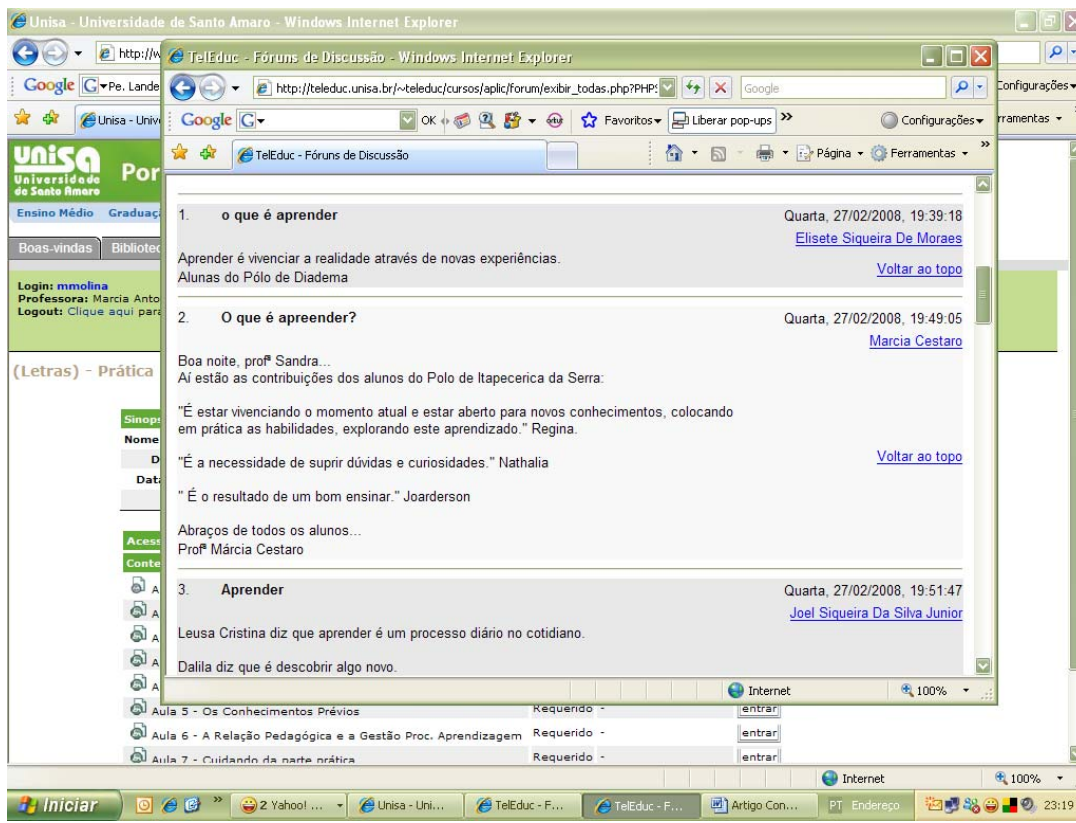


interest from the students regarding the content being taught:

OBRIGADO PELA EXPLICAÇÕES ... ESTAMOS TODOS PRESTANDO MUITA ATENÇÃO ...
 ALUNOS DA CIDADE DE SUZANO
 2. Re: BOA NOITE PROFESSOR
 Quinta, 21/02/2008, 16:19:29
 Antonio Carlos Banzato
 Olá caros alunos do pólo de Suzano,
 Obrigado pelo mensagem.
 Fico feliz de saber que estão todos atentos às explicações.
 Abraços,
 Prof. Banzato
 3. comentarios polo suzano
 Quarta, 20/02/2008, 21:40:07
 Luiz Carlos Navarro
no momento que a pessoa tem a humildade de reconhecer que não sabe, ela abrange seus conhecimentos ...
 obrigado alunos do Polo Suzano

Picture 6 - Interactivity on the Discussion Forum during a Live Lesson

The Live Teaching Practice Forum is also interesting for the fifth module in the Language Studies major:

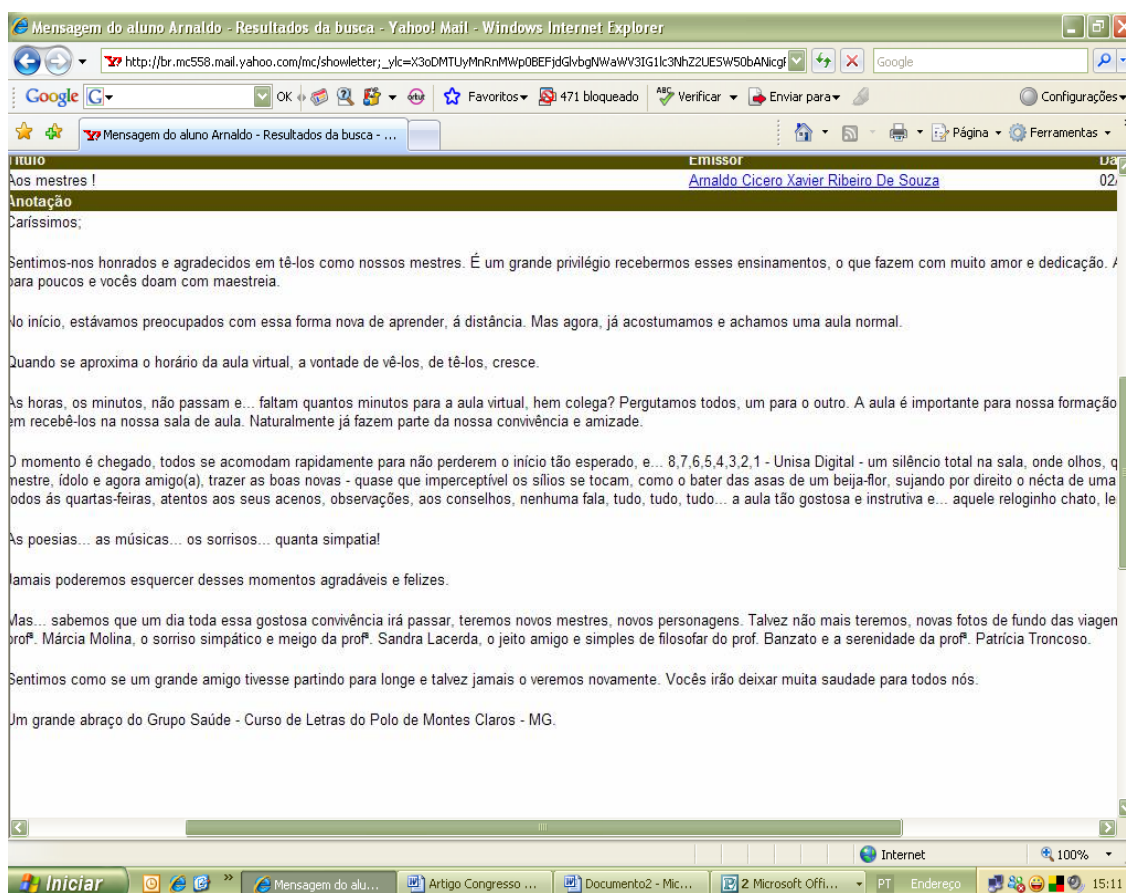


1. o que é aprender
 Quarta, 27/02/2008, 19:39:18
 Elsete Siqueira De Moraes
 Aprender é vivenciar a realidade através de novas experiências.
 Alunas do Pólo de Diadema
 2. O que é apreender?
 Quarta, 27/02/2008, 19:49:05
 Marcia Cestaro
 Boa noite, profª Sandra...
 Aí estão as contribuições dos alunos do Polo de Itapeverica da Serra.
 "É estar vivenciando o momento atual e estar aberto para novos conhecimentos, colocando em prática as habilidades, explorando este aprendizado." Regina.
 "É a necessidade de suprir dúvidas e curiosidades." Nathalia
 " É o resultado de um bom ensinar." Joarderson
 Abraços de todos os alunos ...
 Profª Márcia Cestaro
 3. Aprender
 Quarta, 27/02/2008, 19:51:47
 Joel Siqueira Da Silva Junior
 Leusa Cristina diz que aprender é um processo diário no cotidiano.
 Dallia diz que é descobrir algo novo.

Moran (2005) explains that a good course (and not only in DE) depends on the type of educator involved. According to the author, professors *should have an inquisitive nature, should be open and enthusiastic and should be able to motivate and have conversations* (p.1). This is our concern and interest. We try to be open to conversations, to participation, so that the student will feel responsible for his/her learning.

Final considerations

We notice that, as often as it happens in face-to-face teaching, students enrolled in DE course format are insecure and worried in the beginning and, with the development of their competence, when motivated and stimulated, they acquire an intellectual independence very different from our regular face-to-face instruction student. They enjoy and are pleased with the lessons. This can be seen in the testimonial below.



Picture 8 – Interactivity in Teaching Practice

It is important to recall Moran's words (2002) for whom DE is not mere fast-food, but a practice which needs balance between group and individual skills. Thus, a balance of educators who know how to motivate and have a conversation with students as well as of inquisitive and motivated students in

order to share experience, clear out doubts and find results.

¹ Priest Roberto Landell is considered the Brazilian radio inventor and a pioneer in wireless radio broadcasting. For this reason, the foundation Fundação Educacional Padre Landell de Moura was named after. Similarly, the CPqD (Development and Research Center), was created by Telebrás in 1976.

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