

ONLINE EDUCATION: SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSES AND THE ACTUAL PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS

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Abstract. This paper presents the results from an empirical research about the importance that the teacher represents to learning as perceived by online students and as stated in some pedagogical discourses about online education. We also present the differences between those discourses and the students' discourses. Based on Cultural-Historical Theory (DAVYDOV, 1988; LIBÂNEO, 2004; 2011) and on Social Constructionism (LENOIR, 2009; 2014), this research was conducted under dialectical approach. Forty-six online students answered and commented the questionnaire. The results shows that, although some pedagogical discourses for online education state that in that education teachers are not necessary because students should be autonomous, 73 % of the students interwied states they need a teacher to learn with no gaps.

Keywords: Online Education; Online Students Perception; Distance Education; Online Pedagogical-Didactic Mediation.



INTRODUCTION

The educational objectives from Distance Education (EAD)¹ and face-to-face education aren't different in Brazil. Distance Education is just another way to do education. Higher education, whether it is online or not, must prime for its educational purposes: "education has as a meaning the complete development of the learner, his preparation for taking part in the society and his qualifications for work" (BRASIL, 1996, p. 1).

Their objectives and purposes are the ones stated and declared in the Brazilian Educational Basis Law regardless of its level: "The creation, organization, offering and development of courses and on distance programs shall follow what's said in the legislation and current regulations for the respective levels and modalities of the national education" (BRASIL, 2005, p. 1). That means, attending classes in universities and colleges, online or face-to-face, it doesn't matter. The institution should find a way to make online courses with quality too. By saying that,

EAD can not be dealt as a new paradigm. On the other hand, it is a new modality with its own pedagogical and infra-structural specificities which must be seriously taken into consideration in order to prime for the quality of its teaching and learning processes so that it fulfill the student's needs. (COSTA, 2013, p.4)

Costa (2013) explains this legal relation stated by the Brazilian laws which pinpoint distance education in the national educational system. She states that although there are differences in the way teachers and students should work, the system education has to organize a political and pedagogical structure so that guarantee the national educational objectives. Legally, there is not justification for educational institutions offer online courses with the lower quality classroom course. However, we realize that many schools have used the EAD as a second-line version. Some pedagogical discourse, based on technological determinism, say the teacher is not required in distance education. Some speeches not totally exclude teachers, but put them on the same level of attribution of students.

By having this belief in mind, we will answer the following problematic question: what the students think about studying online? In order to this research, we have made an empirical research with 46 students from an online course in the XXX University (omitted for evaluation). We have made a qualitative analyze under a dialectical approach.

ONLINE EDUCATION: THE PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSES

When speaking of Online Education, we can observe a discourse around the terms: flexibility, simplicity, autonomy, self-paced, etc. What occurs is a massive marketing campaign in order to attract students for online courses based on comfortable meanings that such expressions can bring to them.

In some advertisements on online courses the word simplicity, for example, refers to the attempt of creating a belief that studying online is simple and easy. Generally, the marketing reinforces the fact of not having to go in campus, or not even set studying schedules, etc. These ideas cause a feeling of simplicity because they are directly related to current social problems such as loss of time in transit, difficulty in finding someone to take care of one's children while you are studying, among others. However, what the ads don't show, indeed, are organizational needs of the student to dedicate time to study, which would be necessary to make online course effective.

¹ Distance Education, in this paper, is a term used because of the documents of the Brazilian government that uses such a term. However, we believe that this expression is broad and covers all forms of distance education. So, we specify that the study presented here refers only to the online education.

The ads usually don't bring information about the need for personal discipline demanded such as take some time for online chats with peers and teachers, or how the online interaction with the teacher will be or even there will be such thing.

Another very common situation diffused by advertisements about online courses are the images of people studying with a laptop while lying on the beach or sitting in squares, in situations that show "life without effort, which is the promise of consumerism" (MARCUSE, 2004, p. 72).

In order to having an educational system effective, even if the classes are online, we believe that it's important to listen to the requirements of the students. Students can say if they are learning what they expected and what is difficult for them. **The questions that made us reflect on this theme are: If the same face-to-face course is also offered online, why the fact of being online makes it easier? Online students do not need the same necessities of the face-to-face students?**

Thus, we started researching about the pedagogical discourses for online education. In Brazil, we found four discourses most common: Collaborative Learning, Open Learning, Virtual Togetherness and Cyberculture.

The discourse about Collaborative Learning (CL) consists of non-hierarchy between students and teachers, and collaboration among students so that they are able to achieve their learning objectives: "all the members are all responsible for their individual performance" (APARICI e ACEDO, 2010, p. 138). The CL demands a reconfiguration of the teacher who loses his "patent" of teacher, that way, becoming another student who can contribute:

Neste processo o professor deixa o seu papel para ser mediador e ser um coautor do processo, como os outros participantes. O mediador é um aluno a mais que constrói junto à comunidade virtual textos compartilhados para colaboração no processo... (LIMA, 2008, p. 103-104).

This perspective of mediation does not correspond to integral education once it does not recognize the qualitative difference in the student's education when it focus acquisition of concepts guided and regulated by the teacher: "the greatest problem of online courses is that they focus more on content rather than in interaction" (MORAN, 2007, p. 2). Although it is not clearly stated, the relativism of content and teacher's role along the student's own learning responsibility shows that this theory is close to the post-modern paradigm and constructivism.

The Open Learning (OA) is a theory associated to the constructivist discourse linked to the student's own pace as a determinant of his academic path, "according to the individual's competences and abilities" (OKADA e BARROS, 2010, p. 158). When allied to the theory of Learning Styles, such approach gives great flexibility to the study process according to the interests of the student. Another key concept of OA is autonomy. Supposedly considered an innate attribute of the student, it is considered a prerequisite for success in online courses. Autonomy, in this condition, has an idealistic and liberal foundation (HONNETH, 2008).

The Virtual Togetherness approach (VT) is based on contradictory mishmash among Constructivist, Social Interactionist and Post-Modernist theories: "We are looking for support in post-modern epistemologies that shows post-positivism as a method that can not interpret reality" (BUSTAMANTE, 2009, p. 17). Valente (2009, p. 45) explains that "the main point is that this formation is based on the reflection upon the apprentice's own experience that takes place in his work". Such an approach credits digital technologies for the teaching revolutions on the same extent that it turns the teacher's role as secondary. The VT credits the responsibility of changing education on technology and proposes to reshape teacher's role in a reduced way.

The Cyberculture presents the Online Education as a "set of teaching and learning actions or curriculum acts mediated by digital interfaces that potentialize interactive and hypertextual communicative practices" (SANTOS, 2009, p. 5663). On the one hand, it highlights the need for interaction between peers and with the teacher for a critical development. On the other, however, it shows a technological determinism when it says that those who enhances teaching and make it meaningful are digital interfaces and not the teacher mediation.

Costa (2013, 2014) explains that, although they make use of speech during collaboration and interaction, they take place in a reasonable level once it downgrades the teacher's role to a student's. By doing that, the teacher's mediation is like a path where students negotiate and share information.

The author also explains that such approaches are very close to behavioral theories because they reinforce the individuality and accountability for learning is directed toward the student.

These models in addition to rely on the interaction between the students, they also base on the discourse of autonomy. Such speeches suggest a vision of individualistic autonomy strongly associated with independence (HONNETH, 2008).

Those speeches are paradoxical because they reinforce interaction and self-study at the same time. In this case, the task of helping to develop the autonomy of the student is not placed in these speeches. On the contrary, these discourses assume that the student is already autonomous because it is adult.

Preti (2005, p. 114) clarifies that autonomy, as a project of personal and collective life, "is part of the process to become a man, his constitution in history, a non-individualistic and isolated process, takes place when there are exchanges and interactions among people". This author studies online education and says that, even in graduation, adults need help to study and learn.

Researchers (VYGOTSKY, 1931, 1991; LURIA, 2008; MELLO and CAMPOS, 2013), who study how to develop the personality and mental abilities that reflect the behavior of the person, with empirical studies already showed that autonomy is not purely a biological factor. Instead, on the biological bases it is built over a lifetime and depends on the education and cultural insertion of the individual.

METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This article is configured as a qualitative research in the sense that it starts from a social phenomenon that to discover its essence, you evaluate this phenomenon by a theoretical support (TRIVIÑOS, 1987). Then, based on a Marxist theoretical framework, in this article we analyze informations came from a real pedagogical practice in the context of online education, seeking their possible meanings beyond its appearance.

Critical in nature, this research seeks to analyze the differences between the pedagogical discourse for online education and the student's opinion. It was used a dialectical approach with qualitative analysis. Gonzalez Rey (2002, cited by FERREIRA, 2010) says that qualitative research is a way to get into "significant zones hidden by appearance".

To collect data we used semi-structured questionnaire administered online through Moodle² for 66 students in an online course. Only 46 students answered it. The questionnaire was sent in June, 2014, in the module of complementary activities of the course technician in Sugar and Alcohol at IFG. The students used the tool for sending files and they had 15 days to do so. There were 22 semi-structured questions, which 18 were multiple choice and 4 open questions. In this article we will talk about three questions once they're the focus of this article: 1) Do you need more interaction in your online course? 2) What is your bigger difficult to study online? 3) Do you think it's necessary there is a teacher in an online course?

ONLINE EDUCATION: THE DISCOURSE OF THE ONLINE STUDENTS

In relation to the first question asked, about more interaction in the online course, a great of students, around 40% of the participants of this research, said they would like to have more face-to-face classes or chats in order to clarify their doubts. However, answering the second question, they also assumed that the lack of time for proposed activities, whether they are face-to-face or in chats, is the biggest obstacle faced to continue studying (69,7%).

When we asked about the necessity of teacher for the learning, 73% agreed that it's necessary:

² <https://moodle.org>

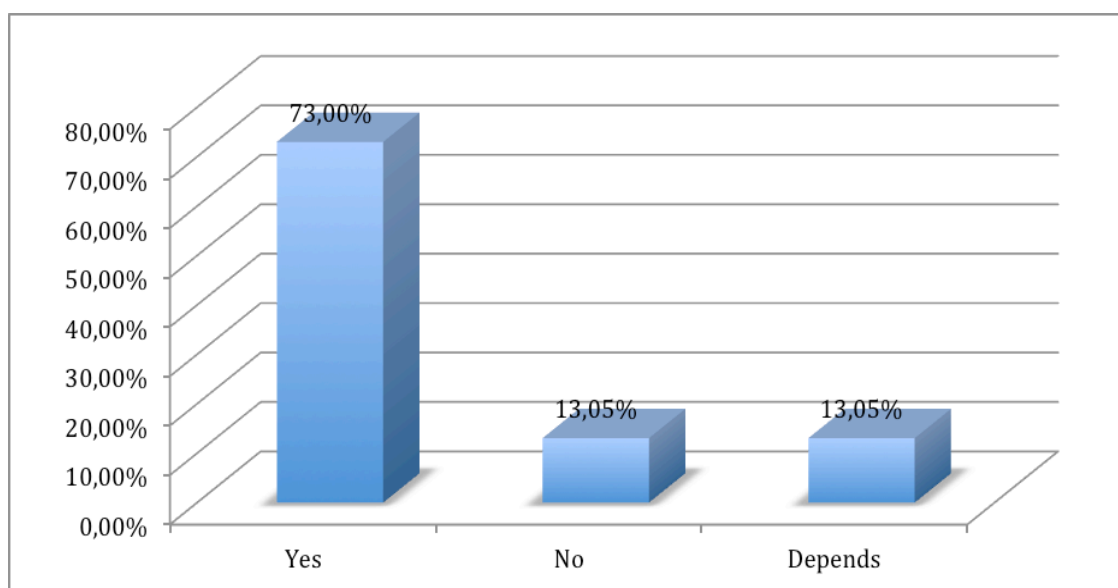


Figure 1 - Do you think it's necessary that there is a teacher in an online course?

Figure 1 reinforces the idea of the necessity of teacher's pedagogical-didactic mediation as a need for the students. Unlike some pedagogical speeches from Online Education, which limit or exclude the teaching activity, at school it is essential.

Costa (2014) explains that,

the assumption that students in online courses are autonomous because they are adults is insufficient and not aimed at educational goals. The elimination of the teacher in Brazilian online courses, or their substitution by technical mediators as has happened, may imply a fickle formation. This is due to the fact that there isn't a person/teacher who can organize, guide and regulate the learning process.

This author also explains the relationship between autonomy and pedagogical-didactic mediation showing that the fact that a person is an adult does not guarantee that the person is autonomous. She explains that this ability doesn't stem from the biological age, but according to the psychological researches about how intellectual faculties are developed (VYGOTSKY, 1931, 1991, 2007; DAVYDOV, 1988) autonomy is developed throughout life and it depends heavily on the cultural insertion of the person.

Thus, even if the pedagogical discourses claim that the teacher does not make much difference in online education, the actual practice of these online students doesn't fit with such discourses. We observed that, when we talk about education, saying in another way, when we talk about human beings developing, the social component is indispensable. Technological resources are also indispensable in an online course, but not sufficient for the production of human beings that meet the requirements previously established by law: a citizen who effectively takes part of society.

Lenoir (2014, p. 204) states that "every cognitive process is fundamentally social and, therefore, it needs social interaction, settling among the students some interpersonal relations, mediated by teacher's pedagogical-didactic actions but also by verbal exchanges they perform".

Therefore, it is not to undermine the needs of students with other speeches that say they also have to review their role in the study. Being within the dialectical perspective of teaching, which defends the student with active participation during the teaching-learning process, we can affirm that the needs revealed here don't refer to the students' non-commitment.

The question is that the formation of people, even if it was only for the profession, requires dialogue to exchange information and learn how to think logically. With these exchanges the learner is formed, as a professional and as a person. Lenoir (Ibid, p. 176) explains that more than a mental production of individuals, "for the Social Constructionism, knowledge and senses are on the discursive practices, they are resulting from social relations which ones determine the senses during and by dialogue".

Therefore, we are not advocating a return to teacher-emperor, as well as not agree with the isolated student of pedagogical circle, in the sense of isolation. But we defend the continuity of the work of the teacher in a constructionist perspective on joint work with the student, even in the online environment.

Libâneo (2011, p. 95) says that the pedagogical-didactic mediation is the most important assignment of the teacher, it refers to "help the student think with the conceptual tools and the research processes of science that is taught". Note that the notion of mediation adopted here doesn't agree with the instrumental conceptions, which reduce mediation to a process of conflict negotiation or facilitation of skill acquisition through technical and programmed study materials. The teacher's job should contribute to make a student learn and know how to use this knowledge.

Some commentaries from students in this research demonstrate that the regular activity of virtual study involved with the teacher not only helps them understand the content but also makes them feel like they belong to school and willing to continue studying. So, in the teacher's job, we can see two big dimensions intertwined: one technique, that is, the transmission of existing scientific knowledge; and other related to the human dimension of teaching, that is, the significance of this knowledge, which includes the reasons why studying, affectivity, why seek to develop targeting the formation of an adult who has actually condition of being a citizen who thinks and effectively participate in their society.

Davydov (1988, cited by LIBÂNEO, 2004, p. 14) explains the "behind human actions there are their needs and emotions that precede the action". So, the role of emotions in the teaching-learning process is that emotions work as a propulsive factor of human actions and for this reason they affect the person will to learn. The student feels motivated for study and work from his desires/will. Thus, the need for mediation, which the students state, along the need to participate during the activities, demonstrates that interactions with peers and teachers are important beyond learning content. They serve as engine for the student reshape himself. It is through them that the human dimension of the teaching takes place.

Lenoir (2014) explains that it is not only about the content and its contextual and critical knowledge that the teacher is important. It is also about the set of emotions that strengthens the need for the teacher in the renewal of feelings that will help the student to signify their learning and renew his strength to continue studying.

Therefore, the technological mediation may not result in the elimination of the teacher in an online course, because his mediation it is not limited to the transmission of knowledge. No matter how didactic and self explanatory content may be, it does not deal with emotions that emanate from social relations.

After all, it is through interactions that the teacher hears and speaks, identifies the interests of the student and organizes the studying activities. It is also through them that the teacher listens to his students and identifies gaps so that he may redirect his teaching plans in order to helping the student to achieve learning. Lenoir (2009) explains that the form of social relationship that happens between teacher and students is what qualifies the process of teaching and learning.

Costa (2014) states that

the adult students, contrary to what is disseminated, they are not absolute students simply because they are adults. They may have a higher level of intellectual autonomy, or maybe not, it depends on his educational path. Yet, the adult has intellectual needs as well as other psychological. Therefore, even when dealing with adult education in the Online Education, in order to developing an education that fulfills his needs, pedagogical-didactic mediation is essential. Therefore the discourse of autonomy, as independence, brings about instrumental background and aims at supporting the need to reduce the teacher's role in the classroom due to profit and hegemony of the dominant capitalist discourse.

The process of pedagogical-didactic mediation online is complex because it combines all the elements of a regular classroom with the elements of virtual culture. But, as previous data showed, the students themselves feel the difference when there is a teacher to help them. It is not the fact that it is taken online that prevents the online social relationship. It is a pedagogical concept adopted by the

institution that ends up in a political-pedagogical organization of virtual classroom that excludes, or not, the teacher.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Heilbrunn (2004 cited by MARCUSE, 2004, p. 92) says that advertisements impose behaviors and products as a single truth grounded in a heroically process and "elimination of all dialectical idea". By having flexible schedules and study places don't mean the student will have some amenities, nor is it the guarantee they will graduate or even learn.

We think that the discourses that say that online courses do not require the teacher, actually, they do so to decrease the costs of their courses. As we observe here, even when dealing with adult education, it has pedagogical-didactic needs not considered by the current structure.

Costa (2013) explains that "despite the intrinsic characteristics of the online school as local flexibility, temporal, synchronous and asynchronous communication, and greater learner autonomy, they do not imply the reduction of significance of pedagogical mediation of the teacher". It's necessary to invest in the political-pedagogical organization of online courses that consider the level of the course and that recognizes that social pedagogical relationship is essential for higher levels of learning content as well as to redesign the emotional elements that influence learning and the student's presence in school.

The fact that a course is online or face-to-face can't be taken as a reason to differ quality. We believe that the problem is not being or not being online, but the way the online course are being conducted. For example, why are there 80 students in the virtual classroom of an online technical course and 30 in the regular classroom? Why does the face-to-face course cares about the number of learners and the online doesn't, if both grants the same technical diploma? These questions are showing that distance education has been conducted by Brazilian educational policies as a second-line of education.

We think it's possible to do online education, otherwise. It is possible, for example, to regulate distance education according to the needs of each educational level. It is about analyzing how to ensure the needs of each educational level in online mode, not to deny Online Education in all its forms as if the problem was the fact of studying online.

This research showed that what impairs online learning for most students is the absence of the teacher. With the exception of two students, others said they were enjoying the experience and the opportunity to study, but they say that most difficulty is deal with no teacher who masters the topics. They believe they could do it better if there were teachers online to help.

By expanding Online Education to outnumbered classes, where the numbers of students imply that the teacher won't be able to monitor everyone, means consider it with different goals of face-to-face education. Making it responsible to bring the solution of access to the education, under the expression "educational democratization" ignoring the pedagogical necessities, cooperates for the construction of negative opinions about their practices. Furthermore, despite the discourse of democratization to apply for it, it becomes anti-democratic because it offers a graduation with a different quality within the same courses, and generally, even in the same school.

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