CHAPTER VI

VIEWS AND REFLECTIONS ON DISTANCE LEARNING: CONCEPT, HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS

VISIONES Y REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA: CONCEPTO, HISTORIA Y CARACTERÍSTICAS

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this chapter is to analyze the implementation of distance learning over time, especially with the advent of the Internet in the second half of the 20th century, configuring itself as an investigative process regarding online teaching processes. The methodology was based on bibliographic research with an analytical focus, with the corroboration of authors and works pertinent to the topic, which problematize in a current and interdisciplinary way the issues related to the teaching-learning process. Thus, since the emphasis of this study falls on issues related to the exponential increase in the offer of courses in the distance learning modality, the central axis that constitutes the object of research lies in the scope of educational technologies. The aim was to point out the conceptualization, history and main characteristics of this teaching modality, relating it to the learning experiences of students. The results of the research made it possible to reach conclusions that may serve as a basis for future research.

Keywords: Distance Education; Teaching Modality; Contemporaneity.

RESUMEN

El objetivo principal de este capítulo es analizar la implementación de la modalidad de educación a distancia a lo largo del tiempo, especialmente con la llegada de internet en la segunda mitad del siglo XX, configurándose como un proceso investigativo respecto de los procesos de enseñanza en línea. La metodología se realizó a través de investigación bibliográfica con enfoque analítico, con la corroboración de autores y obras pertinentes a la temática, que problematizan de forma actual e interdisciplinaria las cuestiones relacionadas al proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Así, como el énfasis de este estudio recae en cuestiones relacionadas con el aumento exponencial de la oferta de cursos a distancia, el eje central que constituye el objeto de investigación se sitúa en el ámbito de las tecnologías educativas. Buscamos señalar la conceptualización, historia y principales características de esta modalidad de enseñanza, relacionándola con las experiencias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. Los resultados de la investigación permitieron llegar a conclusiones que podrían servir de base para futuras investigaciones.

Palavras-chave: Educación a Distancia; Modalidad de Enseñanza; Tiempo contemporáneo.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is important to note that this research aims to discuss the concept and path of distance education in a contextualized manner, in an interdisciplinary dialogue approach, in order to expose legal frameworks and terminologies used, thus clarifying how the process of implementing the offer of courses in this modality has been guided and guides. The objective, therefore, is to develop an argumentative and interpretative study related to the field of educational technologies, with academic and social relevance, whose thematic context corresponds to the growth of the offer of distance education today.

The approach to distance education in this work is based on the critical perspective of quality based on reference parameters, as will be presented throughout the chapter, considering that distance education emphasizes the importance of pedagogical work with well-defined and developed stages, from planning through execution and evaluation. The emphasis is on the modality that is accessed through virtual environments, which are generally done via the Internet, being the most common (although it is known that it is not the only one). It is therefore necessary to understand the definitions and concepts surrounding this terminology.

Based on the bibliographical survey carried out in the research, it is important to point out that the question we intended to answer concerns verifying whether the current increase in the supply of distance education, in light of its trajectory, is aligned with its formative conception, as a field of knowledge dissemination. This constitutes, therefore, the research problem investigated. In view of this, in line with the question presented, we started from the assumption that distance education allows subjects to experience another teaching modality, in addition to the supply of face-to-face teaching, which constitutes an important educational factor.

The methodological approach is one of the most essential steps in a research process, with a view to more objectively delimiting what we intend to study and the research hypotheses. Thus, starting from the definition of the research objectives and the choice of the methodological procedure, with direct implications in the process of data collection and analysis, with an emphasis on objectivity. We sought to substantiate the theoretical basis in current and reflective scientific articles on the subject. Thus, this research involved a literature review, through books, articles, electronic sources, websites, publications, among others. It is important to highlight that this study is justified in the sense of developing a work, through bibliographic review, congruent with the research already developed in the area.

Given the rapid technological evolution, the use of the Internet and new ways of accessing knowledge through the online environment have become imperative and require careful analysis. Thus, this research seeks theoretical support through an accurate reading of authors who focus on the analysis of distance education, its concept, history and main characteristics. In order to highlight the objectivity of this descriptive study, the following topics of interest are: satisfaction with teaching and learning; e-learning; online postgraduate education; and digital technologies. Therefore, the aim is to adopt methodological rigor, aiming to achieve results that will serve to develop analytical theories.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

It is necessary to observe the evolution of the uses and domains of terminologies related to distance education, based on technological advances and innovation, over the course of history in contemporary times. Thus, according to Nunes (2009), the main innovation in the area of education in recent decades was the creation, implementation and improvement of a new generation of distance education systems that began to open up possibilities for promoting educational opportunities for large population groups, no longer based solely on quantitative criteria, but mainly on notions of quality, flexibility, freedom and criticism (p. 2).

According to Formiga (2009), working with distance education requires professionals and actors who are sensitive and willing to innovate, “because they work in a sector of transitoriness, in which the only certainty is permanent change, whose influences come through the different languages of the countries that produce exponential knowledge for the area” (p. 39). From this perspective, Cortelazzo (2010) lists educational principles that comprise the quality of distance education, namely: communicative action, collaboration, accessibility and equity. According to the author, communicative action is related to the action of both teachers and students, which changes from unidirectional to multidirectional.

According to Cortelazzo (2010), a well-executed active educational action triggers a proactive stance in the student. The principle of collaboration observes the sharing of knowledge and experiences, as well as the development of skills and competencies, in order to produce new knowledge based on knowledge already internalized. The principle of accessibility reinforces the quality of care and services to be offered, regardless of the type of education. Finally, the principle of equity concerns the provision of equal opportunities in the educational context. In the case of this principle, it is applied in distance learning when the distance learning modality is democratic, that is, an education that overcomes conditions of inequality.

For Niskier (2009, p. 30), “the training of educators, whether or not they are technologists, today encompasses the technical dimension, the human dimension, the political-economic context and the part of knowledge to be transmitted, all of which can be summarized in what can be called the acquisition of competence”. According to the author, it necessarily encompasses:

• knowledge and practice;

• theory and practice; and

• the principles and processes of educational technology.

According to Prado (2005), today the emphasis is on student autonomy in the search for new understandings, through the production of ideas and creative and collaborative actions. It is worth noting that knowledge networks are new learning environments, based on an emerging paradigm, not necessarily related to traditional classrooms, and can include different spaces simultaneously, in a hybrid way. Thinking and acting in knowledge networks allows “going beyond the limits of the classroom walls, in the face of the dynamism of knowledge” (Almeida, 2005, p. 73), requiring “a critical and reflective positioning of the individual to make choices and take decisions” (Prado, 2005, p. 55).

Given that, for Christensen (2012), the use of technologies in teaching methodologies enables the adoption of changes and innovations, making the educational space increasingly hybrid, especially in the current context of enormous expansion of the social use of digital technologies, through computers or mobile devices. Therefore, I consider it relevant to analyze how digital technologies can be used as educational resources that promote satisfaction and meet the expectations of students in an online course and can contribute to improving the learning process of students. In this sense, Carmo and Carmo (2018) list a set of good practices that are considered favorable to the quality of distance education:

a) educational attitude in the educational act, with the aim of making the student autonomous;

b) rigorous planning of the program, as well as the organization and structure of the course;

c) planning and monitoring of participation;

d) care with the quality, as well as the quantity, of the tools mobilized in the VLE;

e) quality of the instructional design; and

f) well-prepared and diversified assessments.

That is why the Web is configured as a tool that drives Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to keep up with changes and increase technologies, that is, the need for new knowledge and new skills for a new reality, which enables the flexibility of Teaching and Learning.

Despite the exponential growth of distance education in recent years and the quality indicators demonstrated by higher education assessment tools, even when the debate is among education professionals, we realize that many educators do not believe that distance education can provide a teaching-learning process capable of providing the opportunity to build knowledge in the same way as in-person education, since, in addition to the numerous limitations commonly presented, it is alleged that in distance education, students end up being disadvantaged by the lack of interaction with the teacher.

Teacher training in the distance education modality is something that has experienced significant growth over the years. In this line of understanding, distance education has historically developed over different generations, as listed by Kearsley and Moore (2007) in the following diagram, accompanying the increase in technologies in society, from the period characterized by the use of correspondence as a support for courses and training to the current period of use of the Internet, with teaching carried out through virtual environments and network connections.

Based on the classification of generations of distance learning, it is generally considered that distance learning originated around 1840 with correspondence teaching activities. In 1858, the University of London's international correspondence learning program began, and in 1918 the correspondence learning program was created in Australia, “having evolved with the emergence of audio and other 20th century technologies” (Maia and Mattar, 2007, p. 34). Currently, the concept of distance learning is gaining increasing relevance and, especially in the post-pandemic context, is part of the recent scenario of discussion around the use of technologies in education, which is growing at a rapid pace and introducing significant changes not only in the scope of academic training, but in all spheres of human life. According to Litto (2009, p. 14), “the explosive expansion of distance learning in recent years leads us to believe that many of the professionals who today work with distance learning have not had ‘formal’ training in the area”.

In the field of distance education, technology has provided different forms of teaching, appropriate to the use of the time and its evolution. In this case, the challenge goes beyond defining what technology is, as there are issues that need to be explored and understood in depth so that distance education production is of quality and meets the expectations of the target audience. Formiga (2009) emphasizes that distance education is closely linked to ICT because it is an innovative and dynamic area; and, for this reason, the professional who works with distance education is similar, in the words of the author, to an innovative entrepreneur due to the fact that there is no room for complacency and conservatism. Thus, the modality has been undergoing a major process of changes, in view of the development of technologies and their applications in the area of education.

It is worth noting that the use of technologies in education, according to Maia and Mattar (2007), goes through different generations until the advent of the Internet and the consequent use of new technologies in education, as is observed today, through education directly related to learning in this logic of network connectivity, mobile learning, in increasingly digital and technological learning environments and communities. Distance education, through technological advances, with the increase in electronic media, presupposes a physical separation between the teacher and the student, in which the distance is both geographical, so that the agents of the teaching-learning process are separated in space and time, and communication can be respectively asynchronous or synchronous.

According to Mattar (2019), distance learning is a modality “planned by teachers or institutions in which teachers and students are spatially separated and various communication technologies are used” (p. 3). Mill (2018), in turn, states that distance learning is a planned teaching process that occurs at different times for students and teachers. Currently, according to him, the modality has been used to support public policies in order to promote the training of educators and other groups that work with education.

Mill (2018) points out that distance learning permeates all levels of the educational system, and to meet different purposes, there are different configurations that must be taken into account when thinking about the teaching-learning process when planning a distance learning course. The author gives examples of configurations that are included within distance learning, such as “virtual education, online education, online teaching, e-learning, open distance learning, ubiquitous education, distance learning, mobile education, blended learning (hybrid education), among others” (p. 201). Finally, the author concludes that the modality should be understood as a planned process that has different forms of interaction between digital and information and communication technologies.

Behar (2009) characterizes distance education “by the physical separation between teacher and students and the existence of some type of media technology to establish interaction between them” (p. 16). The author complements her definition by stating that the modality is constructed by a set of systems based on the principle that students and teachers are separated spatially and, in most cases, temporally. She emphasizes that, more than geographical, the distance can also be transactional. The concept of transactional distance was first proposed and studied by Moore (2002) and is related to the psychological and communicational gaps that exist in the interaction between teachers and students, who are separated spatially and/or temporally. For him, this distance leads students and teachers to produce different patterns of behavior, in which variables such as dialogue, structure and autonomy are related. This theory will be discussed further below.

Kearsley and Moore (2007) emphasize that the main aspects to be emphasized in distance education are learning and teaching; planning learning and the fact that it occurs in a location other than the institution; and the use of communication through different technologies. These authors emphasize the existence of levels regarding the organizational structure, such as:

• single-purpose institutions: dedicated exclusively to distance education;

• dual-purpose institutions: adding distance education to a campus that has already been implemented previously;

• individual teachers: each teacher has the freedom to teach and create their own courses;

• virtual universities and consortia: when a group of institutions come together;

• courses and programs: can be characterized by the levels of dual-purpose institutions or individual teachers. This involves adapting a classroom course to the virtual environment. In addition, these courses use a wide variety of technological resources.

Maia and Mattar (2007) characterize the online student as someone who is physically separated from the teacher, with a planned and guided learning process and participating in a teaching process mediated by technologies. In this context, the student is characterized by his/her autonomy and independence, in such a way that he/she adapts to a situation of greater responsibility in studying. For these authors, there are two models of online education, through learning communities using synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies and emphasizing learning through groups, and the model that involves more individual study, based on the student's pace. This means that these professionals need to be open to constant changes.

From this perspective, the challenges posed by the digital world and communication networks to knowledge therefore offer elements for a new paradigm for teaching as well, which gives new meaning to education and generates new ways of thinking and knowing, transforming the rhythm and modality of personal relationships, redefining institutional relationships and the construction of knowledge itself. Inserted in the educational context, information and communication technologies allow the reinvention of the concept of teaching and learning in the broadest sense, "as they adapt it to environments that go beyond the reception of concepts and in which they open up possibilities for questioning, contrasting, experimenting and sharing knowledge" (Masetto, 2013, p. 139).

As the flexibility of time and space of EaD can be an important factor in choosing a course or institution, the creation of educational processes based on online communication networks becomes an opportunity for the student in their training process, as shown in the table below, since EaD promotes change in the scenario and in the actors with regard to the perception of time and space, as interaction in the virtual environment creates a new reality.

Technological speed and the acceleration of transmissions establish a new relationship between time and space in distance education. However, it is also observed that most people criticize distance education without having the necessary knowledge about this modality or even having experienced it as a distance education student, thus generating unfounded prejudices based only on common sense. Regarding this, Moraes (2010) warns that before judging what is presented as distance education, we need to understand what it is, how it was created and developed. And that we can and should think of it as a factor in development, including education itself in a broad sense.

In this context, some myths presented by Martins and Moço (2009) still hang over distance education, but they are gradually being deconstructed, thus, it is urgent to emphasize that:

▪ Distance learning is not a modality where it is easier to obtain a diploma than in face-to-face education;

▪ In distance learning, the learning assessment process exists and, in most cases, it becomes even more difficult due to the accumulation of required content;

▪ In distance learning, the student can study whenever he or she wants;

▪ In distance learning, due to the distance, the student ends up studying in isolation and without any interaction with teachers and other classmates;

▪ In distance learning, the level of dedication and commitment to studies may be lower than in a face-to-face course;

▪ In distance learning, students learn less than students in a face-to-face course, etc.

In view of this, although many still view distance learning in such a mistaken way as we can see in the statements listed above, these preconceived concepts are losing strength as distance education becomes more popular. It is worth noting that, in Brazil, distance learning, particularly in the e/b-learning modality, has been adopted by some companies and institutions to offer their courses, despite some resistance to this teaching modality, in the sense that it could complement face-to-face teaching, giving rise to various opinions and discussions on the subject. Thus, the Open University (UAb) is the reference institution for e-learning in Brazil.

Mattar (2019) states that “there are eight countries with Portuguese as an official language: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe, and East Timor” (p. 34). There are also regions in China, India, Indochina and other countries where Portuguese, or its dialects, are spoken by part of the population and, finally, a new generation of Portuguese speakers, coming from Africa, Brazil or Portugal, who live in different regions of North, Central and South America, Europe, Oceania and Asia. When all these people are added together, they end up placing Portuguese in the position of the third most spoken language of European origin in humanity Mattar (2019).

According to Formiga (2009, p. 41), “the Portuguese language, unlike other languages such as French, has resisted less the invasion of English as the language of globalization”. Thus, for Formiga (2009), “the predominance of the English language is confirmed by the content that circulates on the international network - more than 80 percent of the information available on the Internet is expressed in English” (p. 41), as we can see in the table below, with English in first place with 84% and Portuguese in eighth place with only 0.7%.

From this perspective, it is clear that English stands out among the others as the most spoken language on the Internet, given the large difference in relation to German, the second most spoken language, with a difference of over eighty percent. It is undeniable that the greater or lesser presence of languages in cyberspace has a global impact, relating to the penetration of internet use in different countries, thus referring to the possibility of having greater representation and linguistic diversity.

It is worth noting that the integration and use of ICT in promoting innovative forms of education are currently a reality that is growing exponentially in the global context, consequently spreading throughout Brazil, with well-defined guidelines, given the constant updates of the guidelines introduced by legislation in which the focus of learning is on the student, making it necessary to have pedagogical practices that are appropriate to this new reality. In this regard, when dealing with distance learning, it is also worth noting that adults are the target audience for courses in this teaching modality.

The education of adults presents differences when compared to that of children and adolescents. Issues involving interest and motivation are some of the differences that distinguish pedagogy from andragogy and heutagogy. For Almeida (2009), andragogy is focused on the continued education of adults, who have an active role in the teaching-learning process. This perspective differs from pedagogy, which, for her, would be the art of teaching children and young people. Pedagogy, according to the author, constitutes the organizational basis of contemporary formal education, presenting more directive teaching and with characteristics of a traditional classroom.

According to Almeida (2009), the term andragogy was first used by Alexander Kapp in 1833, with the aim of referring to characteristics existing in Platonic education, such as inquiry, interaction and dialectics of groups of young people and adults. Despite this initial mention, it was only after the First World War that the term began to be related to adult education, with one of the main thinkers being John Dewey.

Regarding this, Soboll (2010) asserts that andragogy began to gain space in the educational environment around the 1960s, after the publications of Knowles (1970 apud Soboll, 2010, p. 4), who defined the term as “the art and science of helping adults learn”. Thus, andragogy is based on the following principles: need for knowledge, learner self-concept, the role of experiences, readiness for learning, learning orientation and motivation.

Kenski (2009) states that scholars who are in favor of andragogy disagree with the adequacy of adults to the theoretical and practical assumptions of pedagogy due to traditional strategies, such as highly directive teaching, in which students' experiences would be less valued. The author cites the principles listed by Oliveira (1999 apud Kenski, 2009) that guide the learning process of an adult who is placed in the job market. To Kenski (2009), such principles contribute to the improvement of the worker. Among the principles, the following stand out: the student's critical awareness, the sharing of experiences, the mediation present in the process of interaction between student and teacher, as well as the negotiation between the actors, in order to reach the interest that motivates the student to learn.

Aretio (1988) states that they have a need to learn in order to improve their knowledge and meet the needs of the contemporary world. Therefore, since they do not have time for face-to-face classes, these adults seek other ways to improve their knowledge. According to Aretio (1988), adult learners in distance learning courses have autonomy as one of their characteristics. For the author, the way adults learn is based on their individual and independent work. They need to make decisions regarding time, place, means and circumstances of learning. The aforementioned author states that students are in constant dialogue with their reality, and this relationship is even more present than the dialogue that students have with course teachers. Thus, Aretio (1996) lists some reasons why adult students learn, which are summarized as follows:

a) to satisfy concrete needs and cultural and information needs;

b) to obtain a degree or conditions for promotion at work;

c) to achieve ambitions that were set aside in the past;

d) learning as a means to an end;

e) instrumentalizing your professional performance;

f) adapting to life changes or changing in the face of new situations;

g) opening up new possibilities in your routine; and

h) increasing self-esteem.

According to Almeida (2005), online learning spaces develop both self-learning and inter-learning. However, the author emphasizes that these axes also depend on other aspects, such as pedagogical approaches and epistemological concepts. Thus, it is observed that online study requires the ability to choose and, through it, several connections can be established, being more participatory, communicative and creative (Almeida, 2005), in which students can enjoy a variety of content in different formats. With the evolution of technologies, today the “connections, partnerships, joint work and inter-relations stand out, in order to overcome fragmentation and division in all areas of knowledge" (Behrens, 2005, p. 75).

Back in 2011, Moran pointed out that in a world connected by networks, where mobility increases, distance learning has emerged as a complementary modality to the guiding axis of profound changes in education, at all levels, for all audiences, throughout the lives of all people. According to Moran (2011), distance learning is the teaching-learning process, mediated by technologies, where teachers and students are separated spatially and/or temporally. Today we realize that numerous changes so debated and desired for face-to-face teaching in recent years are already a reality in distance learning, due to the characteristics of the modality itself, which seems to adapt more easily to social and economic changes and technological development (Moran, 2011).

According to Valente (2011), the description of each of the distance education approaches emphasizes positive and negative aspects, making it impossible to state that one approach is better than the other. Drawing our attention to the fact that the choice of approach will depend on the objectives to be achieved, the target audience of this course and the conditions and/or infrastructure available.

Currently, technological support as a means and tool creates differentiated learning environments, in which, as Straubhaar and Larose (2008, p. 61) observe, not only knowledge systems are constructed, but also meta-knowledge, defined as “skills that enable people to assess the relevance of knowledge of the processes followed, and to design satisfactory strategies based on their own aspirations”. In this regard, Coll and Martí (2013), taking as a starting point the typology of the uses of technologies in formal education and using as an analysis variable the pedagogical intention of this hybridization, suggest three major categories.

Kenski (2012) adds that distance education provides the use of technological resources to generate conditions that emulate face-to-face learning conditions, with expectations regarding the power that these resources would have to allow closer contact between the teacher and the students. A common characteristic of most distance education projects is a pedagogical model that reproduces the traditional teaching model, in which knowledge resides with the teacher and is transferred to remote locations to be incorporated by the student. In this modality, there is no common space for interaction and the main action of the student is exercised individually on learning objects and, occasionally, in dialogue with their tutors.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In summary, following this reflection regarding the current needs for technological mediation, authors such as Barbosa and Mendes (2010) understand that the approach to learning through digital skills suggests a new educational paradigm, so that the main objective is to promote a link between education and the demands of the contemporary digital society. In this perspective, it is worth highlighting that the focus of this study was to analyze, especially, the correlations and interconnections between the provision of distance learning courses and learning mechanisms. Thus, the results obtained can be used to develop a theory.

For the teacher, mastering educational technologies and their pedagogical possibilities provides more time, better foundation and greater possibilities to work on content, skills, competencies and values with students in the classroom, which is directly related to the choice of the technique to be used in distance learning and the learning objectives to be achieved. This leads us to realize how important technologies are for the advancement of distance education and how much this teaching method can adapt to this new reality that arises with the expansion of internet access and new forms of consumption and/or dissemination of information.

It is important to highlight that the choice of pedagogical technique to be used in distance education for a given teaching activity must consider different factors, at the teacher's discretion, according to his/her interests and knowledge. Therefore, ongoing teacher training to work with digital information and communication technologies is essential to integrate these possibilities into teaching in a satisfactory and qualitative manner. If it is up to the teacher to configure, in the classroom, a space that is both physical and virtual, it is essential that he/she masters the ways in which he/she can control this process.

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