

WELCOME MODULE

An Experience Focused on Familiarizing Students with Distance Education Courses

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Abstract: The Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), through its Distance Education Center (NEAD), has been developing formative actions for students, teachers, tutors and center coordinators. Such initiative is part of the Integrated Program for Institutional Formation 2008 from Brazil's Open University System (UAB). This text presents a fragment of such program: it focuses on the didactic-pedagogical experiences in the *Welcome Module*. This module aims on familiarizing the students enrolled both in the undergraduate and graduate (lato sensu) divisions with the particular aspects of distance education courses. The discussion foci are the online activities: their pedagogical conception, conduction methods and student feedbacks. Finally, we present some considerations in regards to such *Welcome Module* experience as well as its contribution to the Distance Education (DE) scenario in Brazil. In this sense, we highlight the didactic design of the *Welcome Module*, emphasizing the development of student autonomy, an ability which is essential for the continuity and the success of an online course.

1 INTRODUCTION

Our days have been witnessing the emergence of the fifth generation of Distance Education (DE), based on deeper exploitation of new technologies (Taylor, 2001). According to Taylor (2001), historically, DE operations evolved through the following four generations: the first one was the Mail Model, based on the printing technology; the second refers to the Multimedia Model, and was based both on printing and audiovisual technologies; the third one, the Telelearning Model, deployed applications of the telecommunication technologies which provided opportunities for synchronic communication; and the last one, the Flexible Learning Model, was based on the online exchange of materials using the Internet.

Despite the fact of many universities are starting to implement their fourth generation DE initiatives, the fifth generation is already emerging. This last generation is, in essence, derived from the fourth

and aims at taking more advantage of the resources available on the Internet and on the Web, specifically, on the Web 2.0.

Generally, universities deploy several strategies in order to guide their students in online courses. Research in the field has shown that a well-oriented student function as a cue for broadening the potential of the pedagogic plan in regards to both the usage of the virtual learning environment and the learning process by those who interact in such environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2004).

Though it is no easy task to predict whether the student will succeed in distance courses, a set of broad guidelines and actions (provided by the course program) directed to the development of the competences needed by the students may increase the probability of their success.

Aiming at promoting student's success in a distance course, a Welcome Module was elaborated by the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF),

Table 1: Broad objectives and competences to be developed in the Welcome Module.

Broad Objectives	Competences to be developed
1. Develop the sense of community.	Act as a collaborative member of the learning process which takes place inside the collectivity; understand the sense of community, establishing a relation of belonging with the institution; broaden the social network; establish kind and co-responsible relations with the participants of the teaching-learning process; exert the right to student representation.
2. Develop the ability to learn distantly.	Be collaborative and participative in the learning environment; be autonomous in the utilization of the environment for learning and knowledge socialization; develop proactive attitude in the absence of external feedback; manage the space and time available for a well-succeeded study; master study techniques for better incorporation of knowledge; evaluate her own progress along the course (in regards to what was learned); apply formality rules adequate to her role in the environment and to the media used; communicate properly in the learning environment.
3. Reduce prejudice against DE.	Understand what is DE; understand DE's basic principles and perspectives concerning the historical-conceptual, didactic-methodological and technological dimensions; recognize the advances achieved by developed countries in education through the deployment of "new" technologies.
4. Develop mastering in computational tools used in the DE courses from UFJF.	Get in touch with "new" educational technologies; interact with tools available at Moodle virtual learning environment; be autonomous in the utilization of the environment for learning and knowledge socialization; master Information and Communication Technologies in order to improve learning; incorporate collaborative construction environments as resources for the learning process.
5. Develop a collaborative profile for participation in and conduction of workgroups.	Communicate properly in the learning environment; use collaboration as a method for learning; work in teams; apply principles of authorship pedagogy; be the author of individual and collective productions.

through its Distance Education Center (NEAD). In this paper, we describe this course's objectives and theoretical-methodological bases, as well as we present some conclusions concerning its implementation.

2 WELCOME MODULE: OBJECTIVES AND COMPETENCES

The Welcome Module was conceived as an introductory discipline whose aim was to initiate the student in this new educational scenario: the Distance Education. It was structured as a strategy which makes best practices in online learning possible, given the necessity of the student to understand and get used to the specific nature of teaching and learning processes in DE.

The course was organized according to the competence approach, which means that it emphasizes the global development of the several abilities recruited by the student in communication, interaction, interpersonal relations, creativity, intellectual production and so forth.

The concept of competence in which the course approach is based is that of an "ability to recruit stored knowledge and emotions in order to make

decisions, solve novel problems and work creatively" (Brasil, 2002). In order to achieve satisfactory results, the competence approach should cover the following dimensions: theoretical ("know"), practical ("know how to do") and social ("know how to be").

The concept of competence also involves personal, social, cognitive and self-knowledge abilities, as well as the ability to perceive contexts and situations in which the recruitment of some specific competences will be necessary for more effective academic and professional interactions.

The development of students' knowledge, abilities and attitudes ranges from more basic levels (e.g. acquiring knowledge about a determined subject) to higher levels (e.g. applying and transforming acquired knowledge). The student advances to more sophisticated levels of competence as she both incorporates certain concepts and exercises the habit of studying in the DE modality. This is to say that the development of competences and abilities occurs within a process of continuous and gradual stimuli, which the Module aimed to offer through its didactic activities. Based on the idea that it was necessary to "welcome" the students before the beginning of the curricular disciplines of the courses chosen by them, the Welcome Module focused the development of a set of competences related to each of its objectives. The broad

objectives of such module, as well as the competences to be developed, are presented in Table 1.

In order to attend to both the objectives and competences presented in Table 1, and considering the several learning theories available, we adopted the theory according to which learning is a permanent process through which the subject, during the interaction with another subject, overthrows old certainties, glimmers new perspectives in regards to some study object, experiences different reasoning mechanisms, and substitutes positivist and reductionist visions for another one which values the integration of facts for the comprehension of reality. We characterize these steps as a construction process above all. To construct implies delegating to the learner an active pursuit attitude, turning herself into the protagonist of the learning process. To perceive herself as co-responsible for that she learns is a necessary movement in such dynamics, for knowledge must not be understood as a synonym of either donation or imposition, but as a synonym of construction.

The social interactionist approach proposed mainly by Vygotsky constitutes the basis of this pedagogical proposal. This is due to the value attributed to the role of the historical and cultural context in human development, as well as to the understanding that the psychological operation of the individual is founded in the relations between this individual and the exterior world (Vygotsky, 1998).

In this sense, the usage of information and communication tools – made available by the web interface and suggested along the course – favors the interactivity desired, allowing the student to participate, intervene and establish a multidirectional relation to these connections and their languages.

3 METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

The Welcome Module attended about 1,400 students, distributed into 20 graduate division groups and 20 undergraduate groups. The average number of students per group was 40 and the course duration was 100 hours. Six teachers, 43 remote tutors, 66 local tutors and 23 center coordinators took part in the course. Each teacher was responsible for six or seven groups and there was one tutor per group.

Each of the actors of this process developed different, but coordinated, roles and functions. The

center coordinator is responsible for the proper functioning of the local support center (in regards to both the physical and administrative structures). The **teacher** is responsible for the learning process of the students of a specific subject or set of subjects; she stimulates the dialogue among tutors (both local and remote) and students, follows the assessment process and employs motivational strategies. The **remote tutor** is the person in charge of the direct contact with the students during the learning process, diluting doubts concerning the theoretical contents and acting as a moderator in the discussions in the thematic forum. Finally, the **local tutor** is responsible for the local support in regards to the development of the competences needed for the accomplishment of the DE activities, guiding the students in which concerns the fulfillment of the practical activities and group works.

The Welcome Module took place fully in the distance modality, through the Moodle virtual learning environment. In this environment, the student interacts with the other participants of the groups, the remote tutor and the teacher in the pursuit of knowledge construction in regards to the themes proposed.

Most of the didactic material exploited is made available at the virtual environment, and all of the texts can be printed. Besides, the student receives a kit composed of an Online Student Guide, a two-volume textbook containing all didactic texts and a CD-ROM with a slide presentation, texts and a video about DE.

The methodology used for the development of the thematic units is based, as already seen, on the development of competences. In order to suit such proposal, the following methodological strategies were adopted:

- a) Pedagogical usage of some communication and information tools, previously selected according to each objective fixed;
- b) Effective acting of the remote tutors in the conduction of the activities, supervising the chronogram fulfillment, inciting student's participation and providing group/individual support to students;
- c) Accompaniment of the process by the teacher in charge of the module, providing feedback to students, mainly in regards to the subjects studied;
- d) Deployment of learning techniques focused on the competences to be developed;
- e) Intensification of dialogue among the participants in the course as a key factor for the implementation/maintenance of the social interactionist approach;

- f) Accompaniment of the students' scores and satisfaction through assessment instruments in accordance to the formative approach;
- g) Effective acting of the local tutors, at the support center, aiming at solving potential technological difficulties presented by students.

Abandonment or partial accompaniment of activities occurred with around 10% of the total amount of students (10.33% among undergraduate students and 9.84% among graduate ones).

4 FROM PLANNING TO PRACTICE

Up to this point we described how the Welcome Module was conceived and planned. From this point on, we intend to report, and, at the same time, discuss, how this course took place. We will approach the following issues: what activities were proposed; how did students perform along the module; how did they evaluate the module; and what is the role of teachers and tutors in the effective deployment of the social interactionist approach.

The Federal University of Juiz de Fora, through NEAD, selected and tested several tools aimed at enhancing the usage of web in its DE courses. Besides, there was a pursuit of the development activities which could lead students to engage in group tasks. The Welcome Module was structured into five Moments, lasting one month for graduate students and two for undergrads, although both courses were 100 hours long.

During Moment 1, named "*Opening Paths*", the construction of a virtual community was emphasized. In order to achieve this goal, four activities were proposed:

- Activity 1: Access to Moodle (checking the system access and getting in touch with the tools in the environment), with the aid of a didactic text, in order to get to know its interface and tools.
- Activity 2: Participation in the forum "*Opening paths: enlarging the relationships network*". This forum reinforces the intentions of the other media used in which concerns the main goal of this unit, which is to develop the sense of community among participants. This activity is responsible for starting the student-student and student-tutor meetings and for promoting the exchange of expectations, perceptions concerning the course, formation, experience in DE courses, preferences etc.
- Activity 3: Access to the Meeting Point in order to exploit its working tools. The student must access

this environment in order to fill in her profile and disclose her preferences (on reading, leisure, sports, music, art, movies, ecology etc.). The intention is that they establish a social network of relationships among themselves. Hence, the idea is that visits to this environment be permanent.

- Activity 4: Experience report, the description and reflection about the tools and issues found during the experience with the course up to that moment.

In Moment 2, entitled "*Drawing the way in DE*", whose goal was to guide the student for a well-succeeded study in DE – emphasizing time management – the following activities were proposed:

- Activity 1: "*Time Management*" forum, during which each student should tell about the strategies deployed in order to organize her activities within the time available.
- Activity 2: Production of a scheme of the text "*Study techniques*".
- Activity 3: Familiarization with some resources of Google Apps Education, a tool for editing, communicating and searching available on the web.

The third Moment, "*When one knows history, the walk is easier*", we emphasized the conceptual aspects of a DE course through the following activities:

- Activity 1: Construction of a glossary of DE terms.
- Activity 2: Supervised research on the web.
- Activity 3: Construction of a conceptual map from the Cmaptools software.

During Moment 4, named "*A good path is made with good tools*", the focus was to develop mastering in the computational tools used in DE courses. In order to achieve that, the following activities were carried out:

- Activity 1: Reading of texts concerning virtual learning environments.
- Activity 2: Simulated virtual jury about the theme: *Technology in contemporaneity: advances and regresses*. This was a group activity.

The last Moment – "*In DE it is impossible to be happy alone*" – was saved for the construction of a collaborative project. Students engaged in the following activities:

- Activity 1: Reading of texts about authorship pedagogy and operative groups.
- Activity 2: Project elaboration using web 2.0 tools. In groups, students should chose between building a blog or wiki, whose theme would be the Welcome Module.

In order to make communication between teachers and tutors easier, we created a forum named *Our Space*. In this space, doubts, critics and

suggestions were put together. Each teacher established a communication forum with her tutors in order to make the socialization of ideas among everyone possible.

If technical problems were identified in the platform (student without access, unavailable resources, corrupted files etc.), they were forwarded to the Technologic Coordination of The Distance Education Center. Besides, students could rely on a tech support in order to solve doubts concerning the *Meeting Point*.

According to the learning theory adopted and considering the student as a subject in constant process of knowledge construction, assessment was put in service of such process. The assessment system proposed was a formative one and aimed at identifying potential learning difficulties, as well as positive aspects of students' development.

Formative assessment exerts a control function in the process, privileging results along the process in a way to allow a reflexive action, by the part of both teacher and student, in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. Assessment, in this context, is an activity aimed at providing support for learning and knowledge (Álvarez Méndez, 2002; Libâneo, 1994).

As assessment can be defined, according to such conception, as a decision making process based on the interpretation of data provided by the student, taking also into consideration its subjective aspect, it was necessary to apply varied instruments in order to collect those data in an attempt to evaluate as accurately as possible the student performance along the course.

Thus, at the end of each unity, students filled in an activity control check list, indicating whether it was accomplished, whether it was finished before the deadline and how it helped in the development of the competences.

Through graded activities (in a total of seven), students were stimulated to engage in the practical tasks focused on the familiarization with the platform tools.

At the end of the course, students carried out a self-assessment, during which they had the opportunity to review their own trajectories throughout the course and point out positive and negative aspects of the general structure of the Welcome Module.

In this perspective, assessment becomes dissociate from the concept of an excluding practice and, thus, from stereotyped ideas such as "*to evaluate someone is to measure one's behavior through tests*". In a more progressive conception, to

which our approach is related, assessment is a two-way process, optimizing both students' learning and teachers' didactic actions.

An evaluation of the Welcome Module was also performed by the students involved in the course. Aspects such as didactic material, technology, methodology, student support and guidance, and learning assessment were analyzed through a multiple choice survey. Also, students were invited to write about their experience with the module. These data have not been analyzed yet and will be presented in future works.

We understand that promoting collective learning moments is central to a well-succeeded educational process. If meanings cannot be given, but discovered, maybe our task is to create conditions for this to happen. Regardless of the educational modality (local or remote), students, teachers and tutors must be given the same opportunities to express themselves, thus overcoming the transmission pedagogy logic.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The experience with the Welcome Module leads us into believing that to learn in the logic of DE, in different times and spaces, is the challenge of this century. It is a key task for institutions engaged in DE to aid students in order to favor their network communication.

Some resources are presented as shortcuts to the optimization of learning. In a DE course, efficiency and frequency in the usage of the resources available in the platform (in this case, Moodle) are very important for both interaction and individual/collective knowledge construction. The environment alone is useless. The participants are the ones to make it work, with different opinions, varied writing styles and other human singularities. Turn what is strange into something familiar in the DE context was one of the objectives of the Welcome Module. In this sense, the potentiality of web 2.0 transformed students from consumers into producers of contents through blogs, wikis and relationship software, reducing what Moore (1993) and Moore and Kearsley (2007) call Transitional Distance. We advanced towards that Lèvy (1993, 1999) defines as collective intelligence construction.

The technologies available at each historic moment influence society and, particularly, education. Hence, it is important to deploy such technological resources pedagogically, in order to promote high quality DE initiatives. This paper

presented one of such attempts, through the reporting of the experience with the Welcome Module.

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