E-learning Continuing Education: School Boards in Brazil

Improvements to the process of teaching and learning

E-learning continuing education has been largely adopted in Brazil, a country which covers an area more than 20 times as big as Germany. Public and private institutions of higher education have implemented this education modality, which is a great opportunity to get more access and training opportunities for many target groups. This scenario highlights "Continuing Education Extension E-learning Course in School Boards", developed by the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar).

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The purpose of the Education Law n. 9394/96 and the National Plan for Education has been to strengthen the democratic principle established by the Constitution of Brazil in 1988. In line with the Brazilian legislation, School Boards (SB), "Conselhos Escolares" (CE), were established in public schools. They allow for democratic discussions and negotiations. To enable every public school in Brazil to have a SB, the Ministerial Decree was published n. 2896/2004 (Brazil 2004a), resulting in the National Program for the Strengthening of Schools Councils (PNFCE) within the Secretariat Basic Education of the Ministry of Education (SEB/MEC).

The "Continuing Education Extension E-learning in Schools Boards" has been developed in Brazil since 2009 by UFSCar. Last year, in 2015, we had 2,832 participants in the program, with a graduation rate of about 70 percent. The SBs are configured historically as a space for participation of different groups such as principals, teachers, staff, students and their families, and the surrounding community. They are a place of deliberation, assuming the prospect of a co-responsible body for the administrative and pedagogical management of the school. Its responsibilities are:

- **deliberative:** regarding the organization and operation of the school;
- **advisory:** regarding assistance functions in the school;
- **inspective:** regarding monitoring and evaluating standards of compliance;

- **mobilizing:** pertaining to encouragement and participation of all the school community. (Brazil 2004b)

The main goal of the e-learning course is to enable a training process hinged between democratic management in schools and school systems, especially regarding the implementation and strengthening of SBs. One of the major intentions of the SBs is to respect the views of different sections of the school, and act collectively for the quality of education. This body should be constituted by a democratic construction process, with the intention of organizing the pedagogical work without competitiveness and authoritarianism. This should provide for a more comprehensive continuing education experience and better citizens.

Different e-learning courses have increased in recent years in Brazil. According to Mizukami et al. (2002), educators are increasingly challenged to be prepared to deal with a reality that changes every day. Currently, the school system is becoming increasingly complex It is necessary for the educator to deal with the "knowledge in construction", due to the constant changes in everyday school life and situations in which there are no models to follow, creating insecurities in their actions.

This challenge made us develop the continuing education program. It supports supervisors, principals, and teachers to create knowledge according to the situations experienced in their daily lives, seeking

a balance between reflection and routine, between acting and thinking, in order to decide the way they would act based on their own experiences.

Methodological perspectives on the course

The training was developed with priority on the experiences of municipal and state schools, with the purpose of providing motivation of internal and externals activities in school. To design the course, we formed a pedagogical team with UFSCar's professors, technicians (employees of UAB-UFSCar – Open University, Universidade Aberta in Portuguese) of the "Virtual Space" (the platform used to offer the e-learning course), tutors (students of Master's and Doctorate degrees in Education at UFSCar and professionals from the Municipal and State Departments of Education) and trainees with an administrative and pedagogical profile (graduate students with scholarships). The team organized collective actions with the intention of composing assignments and tests regarding the educational material provided by PNFCE with theoretical and practical prospects.

For the virtual feasibility of the course, we created three distinct spaces in the "moodle" (the e-learning tool) platform, hosted on the UFSCar server.
- The first was a collective space, which all the course participants had access to. The content in this space was composed of general guidelines of the course, a studying schedule, copyright laws, a short guide for the preparation of bibliographic references and standardization quotes, an assignments schedule, a news forum, the "virtual coffee" space (intended for students to interact in a group), a chat room, videos, study materials and tutorials, a questions forum, and a library with all of the files posted in this platform.
- In a second space we hosted the assignments rooms (virtual classrooms), composed on average of 30 students in each virtual classroom. Also available at the Moodle platform was a news forum, communication with the students, library books, guidelines, a question forum, study materials, a calendar, the latest news, and upcoming events and recent activities.
- In addition to the virtual platform, the course coordination opened a space for debate in Moodle creating forums and chat rooms, for the entire

coordinating teaching staff. This space was used for clarification of doubts and guidance for tutors, and a place to disseminate decisions made in meetings and virtual meetings through Skype video calls.

The quality of the teaching and learning process was a major concern during the design and development of the course. This concern arose because courses offered fully in an e-learning modality face "[…] serious conflicts due the assumption that structured courses in e-learning modality express low level of learning quality" (Corrêa 2007, p. 10).

The teaching material

The theoretical and pedagogical teaching materials were provided by SEB/MEC. According to Aguiar (2008), the process of preparing these materials, in particular the thematic books, involved a team of experts hired by SEB/MEC, education department managers, and school counselors. One of the features of the thematic books, according to the author, was its theoretical consistency accomplished through an easy to understand language. The themes inside these materials cover the involvement of the implementation of these collegiate processes, highlighting its political importance and the partnership between communities and schools in decision-making processes. Among these issues, we highlight the democratic, inclusive education and the organizational and financial aspects of the school. One of the positive characteristics of these learning materials is the possibility of understanding the fundamentals and development of School Boards. In addition, such materials are targeted for both education professionals and the local community, with a language accessible to all.

As the orientation of SEB/MEC indicated, the course structure was divided in two consecutive phases. Each phase had a number of thematic books.
- In Phase I, the course participants acquired initial knowledge of the SBs, such as the concept of democratic management as a guide to schoolwork; the importance of collegiality in the construction of a solid pedagogical work contributing to the development of better students; the relevance of the SB in monitoring and developing political-educational function of

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the school; the need to respect the student's culture and knowledge; and the influence of the Council in choosing the school principal. This phase included two mandatory assignments (with grades ranging from 0 to 10), a forum and a writing assignment aimed to encourage participation and discussion about the subjects required by the thematic books. At the end of this phase, the course participants received an extension course certificate, equivalent to 100 hours of participation. The University also hosted an in-person event at the end of Phase I. This meeting was planned so course participants could observe presentations where they discussed the expectations and the operation of School Boards, as well as clarified questions and issues in small groups, with their virtual colleagues and tutors, in order to meet each other and socialize, and express their ideas and doubts.

● Phase II was initiated with a debate about the Circle of Culture methodology and its importance to the quality of education. At this stage, the course participants also reflected on the importance of SB on the issue of education funding; the valuation of education workers; rural education; the SB and the issue of social equality and human rights, and how to organize SBs in forums. The course participants were asked to reflect on their own SBs. In order to do this, it was proposed to conduct assignments featuring real problems, which inquired reflection on crucial issues of the SB. At the end of the course, the participants prepared a final activity, the Plan of Action (PA). Prepared individually or in groups, the PA followed the general project structure, featuring a problem; diagnostics; proposal for action for this problem; objectives and procedures to solve the problem; schedule according with the school activities; and follow up actions. The purpose of this plan was to promote actions that would strengthen the cities of the SB and the course participants, focusing on particular issues in each town, and considering their different realities.

Regarding the evaluation criteria of the mandatory assignments in the course, it was required for the course participants to average six (6 out of 10) for each thematic book, both in Phase I and in II, and established computed frequencies (minimum of 75 percent of virtual presence). We decided for a parallel evaluation in order to solve problems with the execution of assignments, such as participants who did not have computers at home, problems with internet access, and even those who could not manage their schedules to finish the two required assignments, often resulting in quitting the course. In addition to this parallel evaluation, we set a final parallel evaluation in order to recover students that were not able to finish their assignments due to time and for those that eventually dropped the course. They had the opportunity, at the end, to recover the assignments they were not able to finish, obtaining the maximum average value of six (6 out of 10).

Operationalization

We divided course participants into virtual classrooms in which each had a tutor responsible to answer questions and help in the construction of the assignments. Some forums were designated for the participants to post opinions and to socialize experiences in order to integrate all the course participants in discussions related to the SB. Since e-learning does not include personal contact, it is important to have these kinds of procedures. Therefore, it was important to systematize the contents, prepared by the pedagogical team of UFSCar to assist in the comprehension of all of the assignments proposed, and also ensure the participation of the students.

Another method that helped the monitoring and performance of course participants was the creation of spreadsheets, by the pedagogical team of UFSCar. With these survey data, we obtained more accurate information of the activity of virtual classrooms and students' participation, identifying the main problems to be solved more concisely and quickly.

Collaborative learning was the methodological approach of the course. At each stage, spaces were provided to start the dialogue between the students. These dialogues were directed by questions involving certain issues and guided by the tutor. Their insertions into the forum were essential, they were orientated to follow the debates and, when necessary, (re-)direct the discussions towards the theme. These actions tended to minimize possible conflicts that might occasionally arise due to the range of cultural, regional, and political and ideologies.

It was agreed between the tutors and main coordinators that evaluations of assignments should be corrected not just in the prospective of right or wrong based just in academic or technical issues. For example, the tutors would give credit to students that demonstrate an ability to write or express themselves through more elaborate papers, but also consider the participation and performance of the students during the assignments, and specifically course participants who were linked and active in SBss. The proximity between tutors and course participants was one of the fundamental aspects of the course. Even with all the work done in the virtual platform, the tutors were instructed to build a partnership with the course participants, accompanying them daily. This relationship was based on the methodological approach of Paulo Freire's Culture Circles, in which there is no place for discrimination and exclusion. "The methodology of human formation of Culture Circles realizes its epistemological view, theoretical and educational, especially the idea that the student is the subject of the educational process and that the teacher also learns" (Brazil 2006, p. 16). This methodology requires: flexibility; respect for differences; constant review of the assignments throughout the process; and open dialogue with the course participants. It is suggested that the Culture Circle becomes a pedagogical work for the qualification of School Counselors and other interested groups.

One difficulty in using this approach is the willingness to participate in the Culture Circles, due to the time that is needed for the decisions on the proposals and/or everyday problems.

The issue of time was also one of the concerns of the Extension Course. Due to the course participants availability to perform the assignments, research and discussions were limited for various reasons. The way the course participant was oriented and assisted concerning the achievements of their assignments was of fundamental importance, since "the high loss

in the e-learning courses is well known in academic circles [...]" (Mill/Ribeiro/Oliveira 2010, p. 187).

Some conclusions

Throughout the course we realized that we resolved many questions that have arisen regarding the function and responsibilities of School Boards and the counselors. We noticed that the course participant's own point of view and reality along with the content studied would eventually change their conceptions of democratic management and arouse or enlarge new insights regarding ways to structure their School Boards. "In many cases, our team is requested to: support and explain laws and regulations relating to the SB, report actions that encourage community participation, or listen to outpourings about the reality they are immerged" (Silva/Luiz/Silva 2013, p. 275)

The knowledge acquired by course participants during the continuing education course enables modification of concepts and daily acts, through reflection and dialogue. The course of E-learning Continuing Education Extension in School Boards at UFSCar taught content and activities that enabled educators to research and better understand their realities through constant dialogue, adjustments, and readjustments. The pedagogical work of UFSCar intended for the course participants to gain knowledge and skills that should make them able to overcome their own difficulties.

We consider the necessity that there should be more continuing education courses as the one offered by UFSCar. Far from making unrestricted conclusions, we consider this article important in the process of understanding the relevance of having a School Board active and participating in school but in knowledge that there is still a challenge for all of us as educators. We believe that constant democratic practices and procedures in schools bring improvements to the issues related to the students' process of teaching and learning.

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