

A Participatory School Administration Model - Multidisciplinary Team Interaction and Communication Processes Focusing on Teaching-Learning Improvement

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at describing some important interactions among the subjects involved in the teaching-learning process in a distance Latu-Sensu graduation program at Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo - Ifes, the resources used and how communication takes place. We will highlight the interactions among the multidisciplinary team members, in a participatory administration model, by means of shared, educational leadership and co-leadership, focusing on teaching-learning improvement.

Keywords: Interaction and Communication; Participatory Administration, Leadership, Multidisciplinary Team.

1. Introduction

In Distance Learning (DL) the course team, teachers, tutors and students are, most of the time, in different places and time, which makes the teaching-learning process more complex. Nevertheless, Moore and Kearsley point out that the major problem is not one of physical distance, but of transactional distance, defined by those authors as:

[...] the understanding and communication hiatus between teachers and students, caused by the geographical distance that needs to be overcome by means of differentiating procedures in instructional elaboration and facilitation of interaction.^[1]

One way to reduce interactional distance is by increasing the amount of dialogue and interactions. Many are the subjects involved in the teaching-learning process and thus, so that communication between students and tutor-teachers is optimized, interaction among the remaining members of the team must also be planned and executed.

However, as Mattar mentioned^[2], a major problem in DL institutions when it comes to interactions is that they stop there. That is, they build a model that emphasizes the “who” in the interaction, leaving aside the “what”. Or, in other words, they concentrate on the subjects who interact but do not define the nature and objective of these interactions. We should add here that, besides defining the “who” and the “what”, we must also define the “how”.

Also, it is worth adding that, in order for this aim to be achieved, it is important that the institution and, above all, the course management team work in accordance with the principles of participatory administration, in shared, educational leadership and co-leadership. As Lück highlights:

In addition to the control, which greatly aims at guaranteeing basic standards of performance, it is necessary to stimulate reaching bigger, broader, newer and more advanced results. Therefore, when performing control practices, it is of fundamental importance to associate them to dialogue, feedback, guidance and self-reflection, as means of inspiration and awareness [...].^[3]

This way, this article aims at describing some important interaction and communication intercourses in the multidisciplinary team in charge of the distance *Latu Sensu* graduate course in Computers in Education (CE), highlighting its objectives, the main technological resources used and the subjects involved, in a model of shared, educational leadership and co-leadership.

2. Course Multidisciplinary Team and Some Interactions

In the model of distance education in the CE course, we have as participants in the process, among others, the following professionals: course coordinator; tutor coordinator; pedagogue; proofreaders; instructional designer; term paper coordinator; content and formation teachers; distance and on-campus tutors; term paper advisors and, of course, the student, the focal point of all the process. These will be described in the following paragraphs.

The coordination team is responsible for planning and executing the course, and is formed by the course coordinator, tutor coordinator, pedagogue, instructional designer and term paper coordinator.

Content teachers are responsible for planning and preparing contents and for virtual classes in the virtual learning environment (VLE), while formation teachers are responsible for managing the subjects, adapting activities and assessment. In the CE course, these roles are usually played by the same person.

On-campus tutors and distance tutors interact directly with the students. While on-campus tutors meet in person for on-campus support to answer general questions related to the course, methodology and tools used, distance tutors are responsible for guiding them in their studies, besides assessing and answering questions related to the subject making use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) Moodle.

3. Resources for Interaction and Communication Support

The main tools used as support to synchronous communication are: chat, activity which can be made available in any Moodle virtual class; web conferences, made available by RNP; communication tools available in the web, such as Skype. Besides, synchronous moments are offered making use of traditional mechanisms, such as face-to-face meetings and phone calls. As for asynchronous moments, the following resources are used: messaging and forums, available in Moodle virtual classes, besides the use of email, which is not encouraged by the team when it comes to the mediation process between tutors and students, because these records may serve as a basis for analysis of the difficulties and learning evolution of these students.

In addition to these tools, we have the great support of virtual classrooms, which serve as the meeting point among the many subjects. The main classrooms in the structure of the course are: the discipline virtual classrooms, the room for management and communication among all course team members (team coordination room) and the room for communication between the course coordination team and students (student coordination room).

4. Interaction and Communication Process

Besides the interactions already mentioned by many authors in the literature, other important interactions have not been well discussed yet. Given the relevance of these other interactions and communication, we will aim at describing them as they occur among the subjects in the CE course.

4.1. Interactions among the Coordination Team subjects

In the CE course communication occurs primarily by means of weekly in-person meetings, which reinforce co-leadership in the course, with the sharing of information and collective decision-making. This communication also occurs by email or telephone, such as for making the agenda for meetings, minutes availability, referrals and even simple or emergence troubleshooting.

In order to send messages to multidisciplinary team members and general community, we make use of an specific course email account, which is accessible by all the course coordination team members. That makes it possible for everyone to be aware of what happens in the course and also for any member of the team to read or send emails using this account. As mentioned by Lück, on co-leadership, “the spaces left empty by one person may be legitimately occupied by another” [3].

Another tool which is very much used is Google Drive, a cloud storage system maintained by Google and which allows us to keep a file repository, as well as shared editing, by coordination team members, of texts, spreadsheets, presentations, etc.

Every document worth sharing with the team is made available in the virtual room - "Team Coordination Room" [4].

This coordination team behavior, in co-leadership, is positively noticed

by the rest of the team, as we can see below in the words of a tutor:

No one is better than anyone else, everyone is there, together. [...] It has to be this way, this is democratic management. You, taking part with others, making decisions. (tutor)

The following describes the main interactions performed:

1) Coordination Team x Teachers

The main pattern of interaction between the coordination team and formation/content teachers takes place in in-person meetings for reports, directives and exchange of experiences. It is an example of shared leadership in which, as quoted by Lück^[3], the participants are free and feel at ease to act creatively, in order to achieve objectives.

When it comes to content teachers, interaction also occurs during discipline plan meetings, in which the course coordinator takes part, along with the instructional designer and the pedagogue.

The coordination team interacts with the formation teachers in in-person discipline meetings, which will be discussed ahead, via email and in the team coordination room.

From team meetings held by the course coordination demands about planning and/or revising subjects arise. That leads to other specific meetings between the instructional designer and the pedagogue, in order to discuss and recommend for the content/formation teacher possible changes and/or adaptations in his/her discipline or groups of disciplines.

The instructional designer performs, as well, meetings aimed at revising, along with the teacher or groups of teachers, the heaping of content and/or activities in the weeks of completion of the course, elaboration of interdisciplinary activities, etc. Again, shared leadership is present and brings positive results, as seen in the words of the course instructional designer (ID):

Disciplines have become more consistent with the reality of the students. [...] sometimes students were getting overloaded with activities that did not add much. [...] Another issue that has seen much improvement was interdisciplinarity.

Besides the in-person meetings and the planning room, the instructional designer also interacts with teachers via email or telephone.

2) Course and Tutoring Coordinators x On-Campus and Distance Tutors

Interaction among these subjects happens in many moments and in different ways. One of them is during in-person meetings, for reports, directives, reporting problems and solutions, as well as sharing experiences. Individual in-person meetings are also held when it is necessary to tackle any specific issue with a tutor, such as problems identified during his work. However, in spite of being a considerably effective solution, in-person meetings can only be held sporadically, given the need to travel, specially in the case of on-campus tutors.

Since, during the course, much specific communication and dealing with emergency situations is needed, email, telephone and messaging via Moodle have proven very useful. Another resource which is very much used is the “Team Coordination Room”, where coordinators, teachers and tutors make materials available and share experiences. The importance of this space becomes clear in the words of a tutor: .

The coordination room has helped me enormously when it comes to documents, understanding the function of a distance tutor, a on-campus tutor [...]. (tutor)

The tutoring coordinator is responsible for following up on and assessing the work done by on-campus and distance tutors besides, aiming at continuous improvement of his/her actions, giving them feedback. As mentioned by one of the tutors on assessment feedback:

If you understand your function and how to perform, your assessment feedback will be positive. But, if the feedback tells me to pursue another path, it may be that I have misunderstood my function and that (the feedback) made me stop, rethink. (tutor)

Since in this process of interaction and monitoring tutors and the coordination itself hone their practices, we may say that it is an approach of educational leadership which, according to Lück, is centered on the formation of learning organizations and is expressed by:

i) modeling, by making use of the example, according to the principle that “words move, but the gesture drags”; ii) monitoring, by following up on, observation, observing presence and feedback given to the work; and iii) dialogue, the opportunity for expression, building meaning together, exchanging experiences and ideas ^[2].

3) Formation Teacher x Distance Tutor

The formation teacher is responsible for the implementation and quality of the teaching-learning mediation process between distance tutor and student

in a discipline. It is the responsibility of the distance tutor to mediate the process, since s/he is the one who interacts with students, corrects their tests and answers questions. Thus, so that the teaching-learning process happens adequately, the CE course adopts strong interaction between teacher and distance tutor^[5]. The tutor may provide the teacher with valuable information for content and activity improvement, by working together in shared leadership.

This interaction takes place by means of in-person or distance meetings, chats, web conferencing, emails or in the virtual coordination room. In the coordination room, each discipline has a specific forum, in which teachers and tutors, on-campus and distance, may interact by reporting good practices and problems that happened. This way they can discuss and look for solutions together. Besides, the forum may also be easily monitored by the coordination team.

The in-person meetings reinforce important aspects in the beginning, monitoring and closure of disciplines, and this is why it is necessary that at least three be held, one for each of the following moments: the initial meeting, when the course pedagogue is present, so that teaching-learning aspects be dealt with and all guidance necessary for starting the discipline be given; the intermediate meeting, when the tutoring coordinator is present, aims at discussing the development of the course, exchanging experiences on the difficulties faced and solutions adopted and giving referrals to the final stage of the discipline; and the final meeting, when the course coordinator is present, for the effective closure of the discipline and to register learning.

The effectiveness of these meetings as a moment for reflexion, exchange and dialogue can be seen in the words of a teacher:

The meetings that have been held are excellent. I believe that you can even cooperate better with your colleagues, you can look for a different point of view on what you may have planned. [...] Having a close relationship with the person you are going to work with. There's nothing better than looking the other person in the eye, getting to know the other one a little better. (teacher)

Some teachers highlight the importance of the initial meeting, others the intermediate, but it is evident the importance given to these three moments for reflexion, exchanging experiences and looking for solutions together. In the case of CE, whose disciplines are planned and executed in an interdisciplinary way, these meetings have a positive impact on the teaching-learning process.

During the disciplines, the formation teacher monitors the student learning development on campus by means of reports sent by distance tutors. It is also possible to monitor the work of the tutor by the access reports in the Moodle environment.

4) On-Campus Tutor x Distance Tutor

In the CE course, the distance tutor is a learning manager for a given discipline, while the on-campus tutor is the manager of a given campus, but not of a specific discipline. So, it is the distance tutor who possesses the specific knowledge in the discipline to help students, but it is the on-campus tutor who has in-person meetings with the students and, therefore, the one who knows them better. This work in which tutors make decisions together aiming at a common end, which is student learning, once more walks towards shared leadership.

Thus, the interaction between on-campus tutor and distance tutor is very important in order to try to avoid or, when they happen, to solve problems. The distance tutor may, for example, inform activity and evaluation dates, pass on messages by the teacher, or suggest forming study groups. The on-campus tutor may inform the distance tutor about the learning difficulties identified, the students who are not attending the campus, etc. As mentioned by an on-campus tutor:

[...] when I met distance tutors (in person or virtually) I would pass on information about the students. [...] I'm not only the on-campus tutor, I am the distance tutor's eye, the teacher's eye, so that they here try to understand. (Tutor)

Many are the tools used for this communication: discipline forums in the team coordination room, Moodle messages, emails, chat, web confereing, etc.

5) Formation Teacher x On-Campus Tutor

In reality, formation teachers communicate a lot more often with distance tutors, and these with on-campus tutors. That may cause delays in the detection and solution of problems, specially in the case of precarious work of some distance tutors. This way, it is necessary to be aware so that there is direct communication between these, and so that on-campus tutors may also col-

laborate on decisions and necessary modifications throughout the course, in the process of shared leadership.

[...] when it was evaluated that I did not get in touch with on-campus tutors... I did not know I was supposed to. [...] But from that moment on my practice changed completely. Today there are very few things for which I do not get in contact with the on-campus tutor.

Once again, the virtual team coordination room stands out as a means of communication, through the specific forums of the disciplines. Through these, on-campus tutors can always be aware of what is happening and step in whenever necessary. In some moments, teachers may also perform web conferences with on-campus tutors in order to provide guidance such as applying exams and on-campus activities. Moodle messaging and emails are also used. Telephone is the least used media due to the high cost of the calls, specially long distance ones.

5. Conclusions

One of the many difficulties of an institution when starting to work with Distance Education is effectively establishing communication among all those involved in this process.

From the many patterns of interaction and the use of technologies, we see that the communicational dimension of education stands out as integrative and transformative action. Freire^[6] states that it is essential that, for the act of communication to be effective, there is an agreement among the communicating subjects, so that one's language be understood within a meaning frame common to the other.

This is how, besides communication, aiming to establish a rich and creative dialogue among the subjects, we strive for a shared leadership, in order to look for this integrative and transformative action Freire refers to. We covet a shared, collective and committed practice, discussed by all, in order to meet the necessary dynamism while monitoring educational practice, permeated by a educational leadership, when perfecting our practices.

It is worth mentioning that, despite being distance learning courses and making use of many different technological resources for communication, such as web conferencing, chats, forums, collaborative tools, email, rooms in the vir-

tual learning environment, among others, on-campus meetings are essential. In some cases, they will occur more sporadically, especially when they involve people who live in distant locations, as is the case of on-campus tutors; however, in others, they should be more frequent, such as the weekly meetings of the coordination teams and the meetings between content teachers and instructional designer.

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