SHARING AND BUILDING INTERINSTITUTIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION:

In the mid 80's distance education started to be foreseen as an adequate way of study that could give more opportunities to those wishing to approach organised proposals of knowledge. However, the introduction of this mode in residential universities has not been an easy task.. On the one hand, the lack of information on distance education promoted certain resistance. On the other hand, the curriculum reconceptualization movement that was developed in Europe and USA in the years 1974/1975 on, and that acquired importance in Latin America since the beginning of the 80's, criticised profusely the technological paradigm of education that had emerged in North America coming from a rational model of industrial production. In some institutions, the educators discussed the legitimacy of these proposals as they considered them a further outcome of the technocratic outlooks of teaching and learning. Distance education projects were conceived as a process-product type methodology that would only account for an instrumental efficiency criteria. It was also argued that all the proposals aiming at this mode were based on behaviourist techniques of stimulus-response, thus ignoring the interaction of psychological, social, and political dimensions that every educational project should entail. Despite all these generalisations, it is true enough that many of the projects that gave birth to this mode of study in different parts of the world had a strong technicist stereotype, both in their global pedagogic conception and in the design of materials.However, it was the good projects of distance education implemented by several institutions what changed the negative opinions with respect to the mode. Besides, the joint and cooperative work between the organisations involved with distance education allowed to consolidate appropriate theoretical frameworks to register distance teaching-learning processes in valuable educational proposals.

Institutions represent cultural objects that radiate certain amount of social power. They involve the existence of large groups of organised human beings, and the cultural productions that these organisations try to support by different means. They also imply the tensions caused by the opposite wishes of individuals as well as the working up of solutions tending to submit these individual wishes to the "group stability". Moreover, each institution defines imaginary and symbolic geographic spaces,
in which the individuals find safety, ownership and development as well as alienation, exclusion and suffering. In the social arena, institutions have relative degrees of autonomy by means of which they can specify and differentiate as generating environments of singular cultural products. On a first level of complexity we find material objects, several languages, representations, diverse symbolic productions, knowledge and conceptions. On a most abstract layer, we can describe two components:
the model and the institutional ideology. The institutional model receives and expresses the characteristics elaborated in the history of the institution through the different assumptions and definitions: the way the processes are generated, the ways of behaviour in different roles, operation environments, the frameworks that tasks acquire, ways and styles of control, etc. The institutional ideology is built up by the organisation of conceptions and representations, which justify the model and seek to support the functions and results of the educational institution. The preservation of this institutional culture guarantees its autonomy and works as filter of disruptive stimuli. (Fernández, Lidia, 1996). The ways and styles of control of educational processes, for example, differ according to the mode of study used. While compulsory attendance to a fixed number of classes represents a condition for the learning regulation of residential education students, in distance education, flexible instances are organised to support students by means of diverse strategies and resources. The production of study materials in which the curriculum contents are stated, constitutes a basic

task for distance educators, but it is not certainly the case in conventional educational environments, in which the institutional model of teaching and learning is comprehended through the classes taught in the classrooms.

This divergence of cultural products generates conflicts and tensions that affect the inside of the collaborative projects of distance education, and implies the need of establishing dialogue and negotiation instances, frequently, to overcome rigid representations that hinder the development of proposals. Anyway, conflict is inherent to the sole functioning of social institutions, there are not pure organisations without divergence and clash of interests. An important issue is to know the characteristics of this complex dynamics to achieve the support of the projects. Each project presumes an activity seeking to achieve future goals. In the psychological present it is experienced as the lack of something that one would like to reach and, consequently, you must work for it. The elaboration is fed by intuitions and feelings that bring previous experiences into motion and try to consolidate an act of learning. In this process there is always an ingredient of uncertainty . Due to the fact that the projects are original and unpublished, the correct steps to fulfil the aims are not exactly known. When the work is carried out among several organisations, apart from this uncertainty, there is also the anxiety caused by distrust and lack of acquaintance with the institutional logic of the other entities taking part. Nevertheless, if the project is worthy, all the necessary strategies will be developed so as to attain cohesion and solve all the conflicting situations that may appear.

*Demands, Needs and Propositions.

The open and distance proposals represent a valuable opportunity of study for many people. Both in overpopulated regions and in those characterised by scattered population over a vast region, the educational actions organised under this mode always reach great acceptance. However, it has always
been a very hard task to decide on the content areas and the target groups to whom the projects will be aimed at.

Some institutions develop before-the-fact studies preceding the projects in an attempt to obtain reliable information that can help avoid risks and failure. However, the analysis of educational demands and needs in some social areas, can not be carried out simply using the market rules as parameters, due to the complexity, uncertainty and diversity of the data. Besides, the word "need" in education has multiple meanings: it may have either a prescriptive use- as "ought to be or ought to have something", starting from a deficiency or an obligation-; or a motivating sense as a wish or something you are longing to obtain. According to this last meaning , when the statement of the needs is accomplished in an extensive and general mood, the goals to reach are broad too and hold the characteristics of ambivalence and transience. When we listen to a phrase like " design a curriculum based on students' needs" it may only be rendered as a slogan trying to cast an ambiguous speech.

This difficulty to evaluate which the real requirements and needs of the target population are, together with the semantic ambiguity of the word "need" when applied to educational situations, makes us wonder about the issue of elucidation of demands in open and/or distance projects. We truly believe that the demand exposed by complex and diverse social sectors, only constitutes one aspect of reality. Answering to it in a direct way is equivalent to the action of stopping to contemplate a tree ignoring the forest that lies behind it. We understand that it is the university's duty to generate demands, create eagerness to learn and foster powerful bonds with knowledge.

*The Issue of Space

Time and space constitute inherent variables of educational processes, and their control and administration are part of the development of any instance of teaching and learning. Since its starting point, distance education has committed itself to the flexibility of these

aspects, with the sole reason of allowing the possibility of study to population groups otherwise deprived of the conventional circuits of educational systems.

One of the most cherished proposals in the distance education mode is the absence of rigid, closed spaces for organised study activities. However, when joint projects are implemented, the negotiation of
of the physical setting to support students' learning should not be left aside.
School buildings, classrooms, furniture and other material objects constitute elements that act as the embodiment of symbolic relations and levels of expectation around the educational institution as holder of a cultural patrimony.

School buildings and their facilities have several functions in society. On the first place, they represent
containers for groups of people who give shape to an institutional identity throughout history. On the second place, they work as means of communication between the school population and the social authority; and finally, they are also the expression of a pedagogical model that imposes conditions on the individuals' behaviour in several ways. Conventional education ,settled in school buildings, can be "looked at" and followed by society from multiple dimensions. This is not the case in distance education. Although it is true that there are specific physical settlements where to carry out certain activities in this mode, this space does not imply the same symbolic functions that it has in residential education.

This bunch of meanings that we ascribe to school settings, has been shaped throughout time. Jaques Donzelot (1981), on analysing the genesis and transformation of closed spaces, observes that these institutions could be called "disciplinarian", due to the fact that their use and elementary efficiency have an un-historical and universal character. The ultimate goal of all these institutions- the school is not an exception- is to transmit moral precepts without the interference of other influences. Following this trend, Michael Foucault (1989), points out that discipline operates distributing individuals in space. To do this, there are several techniques: confinement; divisions in parcels to avoid hesitant distributions; introduction of functional settings to check on the fulfilment of certain tasks; settlement of ranks and hierarchies.

This scheme of symbolic uses and meanings of educational settings as places where power flows, leads us to reflect about the difficulties involved in the development of innovating proposals seeking to modify the conception of closed institutional spaces as the only setting for teaching and learning processes.

*The Ideology of Target Groups

A consequence of the present phenomenon of globalization in education has been the implementation of distance education projects at an industrial level. These projects are generally characterised for being strongly centralised and also because they make use of diverse ways of technology that can reach very distant places. The organisations that promote this kind of educational offers own a purely economic criteria, due to the fact that these organisations are managed under the canons of a "market of knowledge". Distance education is , in this way, rendered as a profitable mode, which differs from residential education because the first one is able to attract many more "costumers" than the second.
This dynamics of purchasing of standardised pedagogical packets through diverse technologies completely out of context from the target groups' reality, can generate cultural homogeneity processes imposed by certain countries or regions.

This issue leads us to the analysis of the role of distance education confronted to the diversity that every educational process entails. Silvia Duschatzky (1996) states that to understand diversity it is necessary to abandon the irreducible idea of a unique cognitive map that unifies stories and experiences owing to the fact that there is not a privileged representation of reality. In distance education this means to generate pluralist proposals

which observe and grant value to diversity, acknowledging the multiple modes in which each culture ascribes meanings and solves its problems.Then, the universal is rendered as a human horizon that allows interculture through the discussion of the differences.

The cognitive theories of learning point out the importance of rescuing the previous knowledge of our students ; on so doing it is essential -as far as possible- to know their ideologies and their styles when building knowledge. This task, complex in itself, is even more difficult when working on distance education with a diversity of social sectors. At this point it is necessary to generate dialogue with the target groups so as to obtain information about their representation of reality , their demands and interests, their activities and their particular way of establishing relations between theoretical and practical knowledge.

Neil Mercer and Francisco Gonzalez Estepa (2000), from a socio-cultural point of view of distance education, point out that from the very first stages in the design of a course, the work team should determine the preconceptions that are generally related to students: the comprehension and knowledge level they are supposed to have, and the "basic rules" applied to the respective area of study. Whenever possible, it is advisable to include in the team people who have already taught the groups of students registered in the course. However, if this is not feasible, these teachers could work as "critic readers" of the materials involved, thus allowing the development of proposals on the basis of a cooperative knowledge.

*Norm conflicts in the cooperative work with residential universities

It is generally true that residential universities that offer distance education projects seek in other departments of the same institution the professional support of the specialists in the mode, or organise different kinds of teacher-training options for their teachers on basic aspects related to it. However, implementing a first degree or postgraduate career in an innovating way, adapting curriculum designs to the characteristics of distance education, renders some complex situations in the core of the conventional university. There are always some tensions generated by the clash between the criteria and demands characteristic of residential university education, and the postulates that constitute the support and founding in the design of distance education proposals.

One of the most common problems when implementing distance first degree careers in residential universities is the pre-eminence of the "University Lecture" as a way of highly structured hierarchical organisation of the curricular disciplines. The historical origin of this conformation has been called "the napoleon model " of university, which was originated in France in the year 1794. This positivist model was inherited later by Latin America during the XIX century and its consequences have been, among others, the fragmentation of knowledge into isolated compartments, the gap between teaching and research- prevailing the first one to the detriment of the second one- the inflexible distribution of functions based on academicist criteria; and the arrangement of autarchic departments of professional nature in the university , characterised by their isolation and lack of institutional identity.

When the "Lecture" model is deeply rooted in the teachers responsible of designing curricular spaces for distance education or bimodal proposals in conventional institutions, many difficulties arisedue to the fact that both ,the organisation of the physical-temporal components for the development of the students' learning process as well as the establishment of rules to regulate them, require flexible criteria that reach the characteristics of this mode of education. In some projects, for example, some theoretical aspects are made explicit justifying the election of the mode based on the urge of assisting the target group's needs. However, there is a demand of percentages of compulsory attendance to tutorial meetings thus imposing in a restrictive mood the rules specially established for the regular courses of residential careers. This situation clearly creates confusion and diminishes credibility on the part of the students who have accepted to study within a more flexible

proposal that adjusts in a better way to their interests. Furthermore, if we take into account that in some locations in which the population is scattered over a vast geographical region and which topography is complex it turns very difficult to move from place to place, we will have to look for more feasible alternatives that enable students to have a real access to systematised modes of study in all levels.

Another issue that arises during the work implemented between distance education and residential institutions , is the hazard of the balkanisation of the practices. The institutional co-operation establishes relations, but it may also cast divisions among the people. It is a fact that in the balkanised cultures the teachers form groups highly isolated one from the other, with lack of communication with other groups of the same institution (Hargraves, 1996). When it happens that in an institution that offers both residential and distance education modes the teams of professionals conform their practices in fragments, it will be very difficult to obtain the projection of co-operative tasks for the development of flexible proposals. The settling of common spaces that enable the different teams to interact, share and communicate and therefore consider themselves as a part of a "whole institution", is a challenge in itself when you think of distance education co-operative proposals threatened by balkanisation.

* The means of study as cultural amplifiers.

Lev Vigotsky (1934) contributed greatly to the field of Psychology by considering the human activity as a unit of analysis that preserves the properties of the complex totalities of the conscience. This activity does not only imply responses or reflexes but also components of transformation of the environment with the help of different elements: tools and signs. These elements are granted to us by other people in the social contexts where we live , and once internalised, they allow us to interact with each other, on an external level , and to modify and regulate our own behaviour on an internal level. Therefore, the superior functions are not generated in the air but they are built based on the relations established with social objects and this is made possible by means of mediation processes. The cultural environments to which we belong are the ones that enable us to internalise these symbols in our conscience. As far as the culture and the education offer us valuable instruments to develop our human activities, we will be able to grow as human beings and transform society.

On his part, Jerome Bruner (1997), states that educational institutions are communities of apprentices that contribute to the process of reciprocal education, thus working as places where the praxis of cultural mutualness takes place. We don't learn a life style when we are disregarded, disorganised or naked against the world, our mind is "diligent" and it seeks for the dialogue with other active minds.
The actions of knowing and communicating are highly interdependent, in spite of the fact that somebody may seem to be working on his own when looking for meanings, nobody can attain this without the support of the symbolic systems of culture.

From this point of view, we consider that distance education constitutes a mode that allows the organisation of powerful cultural tools into contexts that are continuously reaching a wider scope in the field of social interaction as time progresses. However, so as it could be feasible, the projects should be rendered in theoretical-ideological frames that gave credit to the public character of knowledge and proposed the democratisation of the access to its different circulation alternatives.

The eradication of prejudices with regard to the election of means in distance education proposals, constitutes one way of consolidating into reality the principles of social equity and equality of opportunities in the acquisition of the tools of culture. One example of these stereotyped attitudes are the distance popular education projects implemented solely with cheap materials and resources. Despite the excuses given towards these options , justifying

the same through the lack of equipment on the part of the population, we understand that they entail shades of social discrimination. In an age characterised by the development of new technologies that allow interactive or virtual communication world-wide, crossing space and time barriers by means of electronic highways, it is unthinkable to offer leftovers of culture through limited and limiting resources. It only contributes to the widening of the social gap emphasising the difference between those who have all the sources to get to knowledge and those who are deprived of this possibility.

So, we consider that from the founding grounds of distance education that are identified with the opening of greater possibilities to the sources of access to culture, the issue of the election of the means for teaching and learning is not one of minor importance. Through history this mode has represented the compromise of achieving a better distribution of the academic knowledge, thus reaching larger sections of the population. Therefore, it is a priority in all the projects that all the people who choose this mode count with the best means and resources available for the learning process. However, the socio-economic contexts where the proposals are implemented as well as the crisis that our educational institutions are undergoing, make this task difficult to achieve. Anyway, we firmly believe that one way of consolidating in the actual practise these principles that support the mode, is the joint and collaborative work with other institutions that share the idiosyncrasy of the project.

The studies carried out on the development of comprehension using the computer as the teaching medium, render the potentiality it has to achieve significant learning processes in different areas of knowledge. The informatics medium allows the integrated treatment of different symbolic notations- graphic, linguistic, musical, mathematical-, in real and dynamic times, facilitating the transformation of one type of representation into another, the solution of several problems and the development of meta-cognitive skills necessary for the regulation of our own learning processes (E. Martí, 1993).

However, Snir, Smith and Grosslight (1992), after a research carried out with students at high school using simulation software for the comprehension of physics concepts, observe:

"Indeed, we believe one of the unique advantages of building computer based simulations is their ability to provide multiple linked representations that can help students create links among different representations of a phenomenon in their own minds".

Therefore, we understand that the use of the best means of study in the mode, has more to do with the implementation of good teaching and learning proposals than with the intrinsic characteristics of the resources in themselves , even though we may know the educational potential of most of them. The transformation of the present communication and information media into real amplifiers of our available culture, will depend upon the compromise that our projects undertake with the processes of construction and socialisation of knowledge.

* The formation in the mode

The development of complex and collaborative projects in the mode that respond to different educational and social issues of population, requires the organisation of teams with multiple professionals involved in this task. As previously mentioned in another article (Coicaud S.,1997, "The Multidimensionality of Distance Education Projects in Areas of Development", 18th World Conference of Distance Education, ICDE, PennState), we tend to disagree with sectorized work methodology in distance education, as we consider that apart from the highly specialised training that anyone needs to acquire to perform some specific tasks, the responsibility in the development of a project is something that should matter to each member of a team to the same extent. In the labour contexts of the conventional universities, this entails the consideration of a different organisation of work that overcomes the balkanization of curricular spaces. The tasks of production of materials, support of students' learning processes and assessment of all the processes implied, require the joint

work of a group of professionals keen on the characteristics of the mode and axiologically committed to it.

The industrial production approach that Ralph Tyler (1969) wanted to transfer to the schools based on a behaviourist model of education, pointed out the analysis and division of specific teaching tasks as an essential condition necessary to attain the expected results. In distance education this implies the organisation into separate sections for production. From this point of view, a graphic designer should undergo an ultra specialising training on his field without paying attention to the acquisition of some other kind of knowledge related to other aspects of distance education, for instance, Fabio Chacón (1990) in a comparative study between different Latin American distance education models outlines the fact that the approach of systems adopted by several institutions has some flaws due to the lack of communication and co-ordination between the people who create the courses and those who run them.

Therefore, we consider that in the institutions where distance education projects are carried out, although it is necessary to plan the different work stages so as to avoid the overlapping of functions and resources, it is also essential to grant the organisation of multi-professional teams and consequently guarantee the theoretical-practical training in the different issues the mode involves. Besides, when the projects are interinstitutional, it is necessary to generate spaces for counselling and permanent inquisition on the characteristics of the mode thus allowing the sharing of criteria and the negotiation of the different steps to take towards the development of the proposals.

From our own experience and from the experience transmitted to us by our colleagues, we consider that the role that the tutor teachers play in each of the tutor centres or associate centres is the key to the successful support of the mode. However, if the relationship that the tutor establishes with the centre is only based on a contract, it is likely to generate conflictive situations. It is quite common to hear people talking about the "boycott " attitude that some tutors have towards the mode, especially in relation to the materials study created by teams of specialists. We believe that one of the possible answers to these rivalry statements is the lack of information these teachers have on distance education in general and on the proposal they are working on in particular.

We consider that tutors should take part in the work teams of the institutions that offer distance education projects, and their responsibility should not be restricted only to the tutorship task. Some other tasks as: the analysis of criteria for the organization of contents; the suggestion of strategies for information processing; the choice of activities and meaningful resources for the learning process; the implementation of accurate assessment instruments in relation to the supported didactic conceptions, for example could be highly nurtured with the help of those teachers who know the idiosyncratic characteristics of the target students. Helen Lentell (1995), a tutor of Open University in United Kingdom, observes:

" Managers have to go back to basics and ask themselves ' what is a good teacher?' I maintain that good teachers are those who are continually learning. The most powerful tool managers have is the assurance that they are recruiting staff who share this vision of teaching, and are providing the environment in which practitioner learning is valued. Good quality teaching in distance education requires that tutors be given a voice."

This participation on the part of the tutors as joint members of the modality, and the subsequent levels of involvement they reach, render a new meaning to the value of tutorship.

* Assessment as confluence of actors and interests.

Assessment of distance education projects of interinstitutional nature entails taking over a very complex task in which many actors are involved and different criteria interact. Assessment acquires several meanings in teaching and learning processes.

In the distance education collaborative projects, assessment is meant to improve these projects during the developmental stage. That is why it is so necessary to generate the appropriate spaces that allow the interpretation of the logic of the activities and the setting of critic levels of analysis to find auxiliary solutions to the problems that could be found. This means that assessment cannot possibly be the elaboration of a final report at the end of the project, neither a constant and crafty task applied to distance education projects, but it constitutes a strategy of work that enables the recovery of valuable information at different moments to assist the implementation of the proposals. We do share the view of Edith Litwin (1998) when she states:

"The acquisition of a constant assessment attitude lacks complete sense as it would not allow the development of ordinary knowledge or interests situations not subscribed in an issue directly involved in the learning of a subject or theme. Thus the sense of knowledge would be distorted by transforming practices into constant assessment".

Besides, in distance projects of institutional collaboration, characterized by its insertion in the environment mediatized by several resources, assessment is only meaningful for those actors involved as long as it provides the focalisation of problems without interfering in the formation processes in a disruptive way.

When we conduct educational evaluations, apart from asking ourselves about the aims they portray, we also think about the people involved in them. Mac Donald and Walker (1977, cited by McCormick and James, 1996) formulate relevant questions in connection to the research based on case study, which can also be applied to educational evaluation:

"Who do the needs and interests to which the research obeys belong to? Who is the owner of the data (the researcher, the subject, the sponsor)? , Who has free access to the information (whose access is hindered or obstructed)?, What category does the researcher's interpretation of the actions have in opposition to the interpretations of others (who is to judge who is right)? What obligations does the researcher have to his subjects, his sponsors, his co-workers and others?, Who is the research meant for?"

This implies that in all evaluation processes, it is necessary to identify in a very clear way, those who are responsible of the educational decisions as well as those who are the users of the information obtained, establishing the responsibilities and functions that concern the assessors. In distance education collaborative proposals it is essential that the institutions involved agree on these aspects, which are the constitutive elements of the implemented projects. Another fundamental issue that has to be solved between the responsible organizations is the appointment of the topics to be evaluated. The wide-ranging scope of variables that are interleaved in these non-conventional educational projects, makes it practically impossible to have a global evaluation that pretends to reach all and every one of the factors inherent in the starting point of the proposals. Besides, this would demand to have a great deal of time and resources at our disposal. Thus, we consider that it is more feasible that the institutions negotiate the priority aspects to be elucidated through evaluation, which will undoubtedly be the main problematic cores of the project and which elucidation will enable to improve the development of the latter.

As regards the questions asked by Mac Donald and Walker about who has access to the data, what obligations the investigator or assessors has, and who the investigation is carried out for, we understand that the answers to these questions are intrinsically linked to the conception of evaluation in which the project is registered. Ernest House (1994) defines evaluation as a political activity, closely related to the distribution of basic benefits in society . This is why it has to be not only truthful but also fair. Those who are involved in the

preparation of the evaluation procedures, must agree on their moral acceptability. As long as the options and environments where the data is gathered are opened to the public, thus including the different groups comprehended in the proposals and insuring the representation of their interests, the evaluation becomes a democratic process that operates based on transparency and equity.

In distance education collaborative tasks, this evaluative election implies the design of highly participative evaluations, in which the generator institutions as well as the target people, find valuable spaces to express their opinions and ideas as regards the improvement of the proposal. The implementation of planned strategies by a team of experts in the modality that does not accept members from other organisations involved, leads to the development of a slant and technocratic task.

Furthermore, when the experts direct their work only to those in charge of making decisions, ignoring or rejecting the contribution of other actors that support the project from different roles, the evaluation becomes a useful tool for the authorities and the administrative staff who make the decisions in connection to the program, but it also works as a legitimating instance of biased interests. We understand that the evaluation of distance education collaborative proposals requires a participative and democratic model, which can knit a net of voices from the diversity of groups of target people and responsible people. In this way, the evaluation will be a persuasive act around the value of the project that will appeal to the reason and understanding of a personalized public.

CONCLUSION

The accepted commitment of working in a collaborative way to establish organizing paths with the aim of socializing knowledge among different population groups, allows to distinguish a valuable characteristic for the new concept of distance education in certain social contexts: the projecting potential this modality has. The experiences implemented among several institutions based on flexible criteria and having in mind the many different problematic issues people deal with, have had multiplying effects that go beyond the goals of each project.

On the one hand, the people who accept to take part in these educational proposals, find in them an opportunity to participate in the symbolic systems of culture. For those adults whose access to systematized knowledge is hindered by different factors, this possibility represents the foundation stone of new social and personal projects. In this way, distance education becomes an agency that promotes several processes with the aim of improving people's self-esteem.

On the other hand, the shared work that makes it possible to distinguish and respect the different institutional logics registered in the collaborative projects of distance education, opens new possibilities for the responsible teams. This enables the association in order to establish solidarity nets by means of which the problems of the people can be discussed.

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