SUPPORT SERVICE TO DISTANCE STUDENTS: THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS IN ONE BRAZILIAN DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Abstract -*The Distance Education Laboratory – LED, offers the structure and support to the distance education courses offered by the Post Graduation Program in Production Engineering – PPGEP. In order to offer the best support to its students, the Laboratory created a support structure based in collaborative work, where teachers and students are followed by a team from the beginning to the end of the course, as well as prepared to the correct utilisation of the media/technologies adopted. This article introduces the student support service model being implemented in the Distance Education Lab since 1997.*

Index Terms — Distance Education,Internet, student support services, videoconference.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of Distance Education – DE in Brazil observed from the beginning of the 90´s until now may be related to the changes in the regulatory process of Education, most specifically the so-called Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação –LDB, that is the most important law regarding Education in Brazil was launched as Law 9.394, from December 20 1996 and is being continually refined in order to attend specificities identified by represented categories, and practitioners. One of the important points in this law is related to Teacher's Education, stating clearly that all teachers must have at least a College degree in order to work in K-12 education, and a Masters degree to work in universities, at the graduation level. For this reason, a significant amount of DE initiatives in Brazil are structured in order to attend this demand created by the LDB, and oriented to the improvement of Teacher's Education using different structures and media, and basically inside traditional universities.

So, the demand for DE reflects the changes that challenged Brazilian Education during the last decades, and the changes the country is passing through right now, that make the demand for professionals with a wide and specialized formation grow in an exponential way. There is a urge to supply the demand for places in Education for the adult workers looking forward to improve their formation, and to attend the many ones that had to leave school early in their lives to work, or for any other reason. They all have the right to Education, and the public and private institutions are making many efforts in order to get every one that needs or wants to study inside a classroom – traditional or virtual.

In this article, we describe some aspects of the experience of the Distance Education Laboratory –LED, of the Federal University of Santa Catarina –UFSC, a traditional public university located in Florianópolis, South of Brazil. In a open view, the experience with DE being developed in the UFSC is attending a identified demand related to very specific and technical areas, but if analysed more closely, that experience is also attending the demands for Teachers Education, and general Adult Education. Our main focus inside this experience is the implementation of the student's support services structure, describing the process, and the role of the professionals involved in this work. That is the purpose of this paper.

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

The fundamental importance of an organised student's support service has been pointed out by many authors writing in the DE (Distance Education) field [1]; [2]; [3]; [4]; [5]. However, if there is agreement about the importance of such a structure, there is no definitive model for that. Each DE institution will invest in the development of its own model based on the characteristics of the students it serves [6]; [7]; [8]; [9].

There is an established necessity to offer support services for distance students, since these are pointed as the main alternative to reduce the high rates of dropout that characterizes DE. In the 2001 ICDE − International Council of Distance Education Conference in Düsseldorf, Germany this discussion

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was the main theme of the sessions dedicated to student support, where the majority of the works presented exposed the long range planning to reduce the scaring dropout rates using student support, especially in the case of the Mega Universities as the Open-UK [10]. Also, [6] showed the dropout numbers at the Athabasca University, Canada, that rise to 75% in order to illustrate how important is for any DE institution a well organised student's support structure.

Still pointing out the importance of the student support services in DE, the work of Ormond Simpson [4] describes how the student support service is organized in the OUK (Open University – UK), one of the most widely recognized DE institution in the world. Also, [4] pointed out that in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) the student support services may be related to a wide range of activities, from counseling to academic orientation. However, this tendency to define this area in a very open way does not deny its importance in DE. It implies that it is a really wide area, and according to [11], it involves activities before the student even registered to the course or discipline, like information about the courses, the University/institution, and about studying at a distance.

The importance of this area for the success of any DE initiative also appears in [12], where that author affirms that "We must aim for the provision of services which are appropriate to the external cohort we are serving, while recognizing that we should not attempt merely to replicate on-campus learner support services via technology" (75).

STUDENT'S SUPPORT SERVICES IN THE DISTANCE EDUCATION LABORATORY - LED

The creation of LED in 1996 was a direct result of the Strategic Planning established by the PPGEP in 1985, where the necessity to invest in new technologies, and new modalities to Engineering Education in order to be more close to the productive sector was underlined.

The moment when the LED was created was very favorable to the development of DE initiatives inside Brazilian universities, and more intensely applied to Post Graduation programs, since the existing demand was expressive [13]. Also, at that moment was very clear a growing demand for programs offered at a distance or with more flexible modalities in knowledge areas where the PPGEP was specialized, as Logistics, Entrepreneurship, and Media and Knowledge. Media and Knowledge is a teaching and research area that started to be developed in Brazil in the PPGEP, being related to the production and distribution of knowledge, DE, and the use of Information and Communication Technologies in Education.

In order to attend the identified demand a decision was made regarding the technologies to be used, and videoconference was selected as the core media to be used to offer Post Graduation courses at a distance. This choice was made based on the interactive possibilities of this media, that allows the synchronous communication by audio and video, of people that are located in different places. In a country with the Brazilian dimensions and cultural diversity, it proved to be very effective. Also, the established model used Internet based communication and information tools, and printed materials. Another important characteristic of the DE initiatives in the LED was the decision to make alliances and partnerships with different institutions and companies, aiming at the creation of a network that could attend all the Brazilian territory, offering the registered distance students the best possible service in their local place of study.

In this context, LED's "student support service" structure was created in July, 1997, when the first Post Graduation Program at a Distance, a Masters Degree to be offered to Engineers and technicians of Petrobras, the Brazilian Petrol Company was being implemented. This first program, called "Technological masters in Logistics", was the first structured experience of LED, served as the basis to the creation of the "Presencial Virtual" model, distinguished by the Brazilian Association of Distance Education (ABED) with it's Prize of Excellence in 2002. The perception that there was a need to offer technical, social, and administrative support to the students and teachers involved in the DE program led to the creation of the first working team that was responsible for the elaboration and distribution of supporting material – online manuals, guides, routines, calendar, etc. - and for the preparation of students and teachers to use the technologies adopted – videoconference and the Internet.

This initial phase was very intuitive since it was still difficult to find references in the available literature that could help to define the best pathway to be followed because of the very specific characteristics of the experience being developed – using videoconference, offering a complete Post Graduation program at a distance, attending working students. Also the benchmarking with Brazilian and international institutions working with DE showed that every single one has a different model, a different structure, specially in the area of student support. All of the previously quoted factors were very influential in the decision to develop a local model.

The first student support structure established in the Laboratory had only three professionals allocated to do all the work related. This group had a very wide array of responsibilities, and a great lack of references, of research to support their work. So, besides the direct work with students and teachers, this group started to make some related readings, benchmarking research, and to register the process, studying and learning, and gradually becoming a reference itself inside the Laboratory.

Until the end of 1997, LED offered technical and pedagogical support and structure for two Master's programs with a total of 49 students and not more than four professors

for each trimester. However, in the first trimester of 1998, more three new programs had been implemented. As a consequence, the number of students to be supported started to rise. At that moment, the necessity of establishing a more organized and defined structure to support students and teachers involved in the programs was perceived as urgent. New professionals were contracted, and the role and function of the monitor (student supporter) started to be defined, the model of student support as monitory was implemented [14].

Once the importance of the student support structure was recognized, the team responsible for the students and teachers support in the LED was identified as the Monitoring and Research Team. Like all the other teams working in the Laboratory, this team is formed by professionals form very different backgrounds, like Sociology, Psychology, Engineering, and Pedagogy. All of them are Graduate students, and are doing their Master or Doctorate researches in areas related to DE, and Adult Education.

Since the "turning point" in 1998, where the fundamental questions were identified, the professionals working with student support inside the Laboratory are dedicated to three main lines of activities: informing, following, and answering students and teachers in the different models of courses offered, form Internet to printed materials. It is important to make it clear that in this work we are looking at the implementation process of the student support services in the Laboratory as a whole, but with a focus on the experience with Masters programs using videoconference and the Internet. These activities may be described as related to the keeping the students motivated, stimulating the communication and interaction among the students outside classroom time, and helping students and teachers to learn how to use the different media applied to the courses.

The importance of motivation to distance education students was discussed by some authors [15]; [16]; [17]; [18]. For this reason, the student support team invests in many activities to keep the students motivated, specially by using all the media the students have access to interact with them, and to make every student feel that there is somebody that is concerned with her/his success in the studies, sending motivational messages, helping and answering in a timely and cheerful way. The most important thing for a monitor is to establish a contact with the students he/she is responsible for, making them understand that they are part of a group, and that everyone is trying to make the best they can. To build that situation of empathy, the monitor that is responsible for a group usually has a face-to-face meeting with the students in the beginning of the course. This kind of activity already proved o be very important in order to create a sense of proximity and confidence between the students and their monitor [18].

The report wrote by [19] shows the results of a research done with a group of students of the Laboratory, where she found out that the motivational role of the support team is highly valued by the students, specially related to the

utilization of the technologies (4.64 points in the used Likert scale), and in keeping the motivation (4.08 points in the used Likert scale).

An important point related to the motivational role of the LED's student support team is related to the practice of process evaluation established in the Laboratory since its creation, in 1995. All courses, and all disciplines offered are evaluated at least once. The process of evaluation is digitalized, where the students can access the online forms from any place, answer it, and in a very short period, have the answers of all the group analyzed together in a final report produced by the monitor. From 1997 to 2001, 71,2% of the disciplines offered where evaluated, and the results of this evaluation process used to solve the identified problems, and improve the process, attending the students demands [19].

Also, in the beginning of each new course a diagnostic evaluation is made, in order to have some basic information about the students, the so-called "Perfil da Turma", what helps the planning process, for the support team, and for the teachers involved. Knowing the students background, their previous experience with the media applied in the course, and their motivation to take the course, makes it easier to offer a personalized service to all students of the group.

The other two lines of activities developed by the LED's students support team - stimulating the communication and interaction among the students outside classroom time, and helping students and teachers to learn how to use the different media applied to the courses – may be seen as a unique block. In order to stimulate the communication of the group of students outside classroom time, the monitor is also stimulating the use of the different media adopted in the course. Using the Internet, or the telephone, or videoconference, the students may interact among them, do their activities in a cooperative and collaborative manner, contact the teachers, and exchange reference material, among other things. The role of the monitor (student supporter) is to make the students – and teachers – feel that all the technical or operational problems will be quickly solved, and that they can dedicate themselves only to learn and teach, always at a distance, but feeling close. It is important that the interactive communication process goes as smoothly as possible, so the mediating technology seems invisible [21].

CONCLUSION

LED's experience in offering DE courses, specially Post Graduation courses by videoconference and Internet, points up to the importance of offering to students and teachers a well structured support service, and well prepared professionals, trained to attend the constant demands in a timely and sympathetic way. A result of the work being done by the student support team in the Laboratory is the number of students that evaluated the support structure as Excellent or Very Good in the evaluations done since 1998 – 71% of the students enrolled [20].

It is important to say, in order to conclude, that the activities related to student support in DE cannot be seen as static, it is

a dynamic process that needs to be permanently improved, adapted to new students, new situations, and specially, the new possibilities of communication and interaction at a distance offered by the new technologies, always evolving.

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