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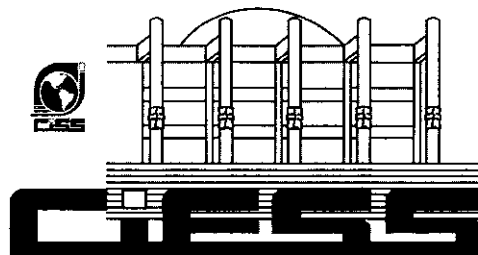
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Towards an International Net for Learning: At-a-Distance Education at the Inter-American Center for Social Security Studies

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Transmission of knowledge in new contexts

If the evolution of the new communication technologies and their fast diffusion in different fields of the economy and of society are evidence of a growingly globalized world, this is not exempt of the surging of new interactions, paradoxes, associations of causes and consequences that transform the use of communication media themselves as well as social relations. It is so that this epoch, which could be better referred to as a period between millenniums rather than as a new millennium, we are living the explosion of possibilities of transmission and dialogue for the

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construction and dissemination of knowledge, while at the same time problems and crisis survive that bring about challenges for education in general and give a new dimension to the role of at-a-distance education. More so, a first challenge to the above consists in the application of an integrating view in which the productive, technological and social and personal development teaching-learning processes are considered as ambits of reciprocal influence.

One of the aspects that demands a deeper reflection is that the regulation of the growing flow of messages is only entrusted to the laws of the market (Sfez, 1999). A paradigmatic example of the above is represented by internet, a technology that in spite of reproducing the iniquities of an international economic order already existing since the appearance of other communication media, is offered as the option for the universal access to knowledge and for revolutionizing the logics of these media. Granting preeminence to the circulation of information, we leave aside that < < the inequality of knowledge cannot be transmuted, by virtue of internet, into a general equality > > (Sfez, 199: 19). The above is explained not only by the iniquities for the material access to technology, but also, because such equality demands the possibility of building cognitive, symbolic and practical bases that will give sense to navigation in that net.

The construction of these bases implies considering that the application of the so called new technologies – among them internet – is still performed by joining together a high presence of other technologies (printed material, telephone, etc.), and at the same time bearing in mind evolution originated by the new technologies, such as the following: *diversification of sources of information*, making relative the possession of this technology in contrast with the importance of knowledge and of the valuation of know-how; *transformation of the reading forms*, that make necessary competences for

decoding audio-visual and hypertextual media or, in general, non lineal languages; as well as the *change in the notion of distance*, which is determined every day more by telecommunications.

What has been said up to this point, does not seek to be placed in the positions of technophobes or technophiles with which the influence of the new technologies is frequently approached, but to describe the weight of structuring in the manner of a net as a distinctive trait of contemporary societies (Castells, 1999). Through this representation, based on interconnected nodes which in their inside also present multiple interconnections, the power of flows can be explained as a morphology that has provoked important changes in the different ambits of society.

On the other hand, the transcendence of these changes leads to value the role of educational institutions –each one of them in their own way and according to their nature and purposes– as structures of refuge for the human being. These structures are, as stated by Lluis Duch (1997: 26-27), relating elements that permit the socialization and construction of reality, as well as the updating of the capacities of human beings to face the contingency that characterizes life. As structures of refuge we can mention the family, educational centers, institutions and, in short, different instances that, with the possibility of building a community, have among other functions that of transmitting knowledge and facilitate its construction. However, these structures are in crisis, following Duch, due to the difficulty of their transmissions to have significance and become a melting pot of sense in society. The above, at a time in which we take for granted the multiplication of sources of knowledge, the ability to connect with them, the overcoming of frontiers in the diffusion of know-how and the importance of updated information.

Learning throughout life and labor training in informational societies

Starting from the need to build references that will facilitate the construction of knowledge and not only a fast circulation and connection, from the need to take advantage of technology for the dialogue and the imagination of new forms of communication, and from the need to strengthen the transcendence of educational institutions as structures of refuge, the importance stands out of educational guidelines that will effectively orient individuals and institutions in a globalized world and in informational societies[1].

In this sense, concepts have been coined such as learning society (Raggat, 1996) or learning throughout life (Delors, 1997), which express the central role of education and continuous training in present societies. The breaking with the traditional distinction between basic education and permanent education, the need to update and apply knowledge, as well as the complementation between different types and levels of training, are essential aspects of these concepts.

The above is motivated, to a good extent, by the evolution of the labor world which every day tends more and more to fundament < <productivity in the generation and processing of knowledge > > (Castells, 1999:31), transforms the time devoted to work and demands the updating of competences and a professional adaptability. In this manner, due to the fact that the concept of *learning throughout life* insists in the use of all the opportunities that

technology and the productive and social life offer to make the access to the teaching-learning processes more flexible, we speak of the growth of at-a-distance education.

However, the true innovating nature of this modality lays not so much on the incorporation of new technologies, on the capacity for transmission to distant and isolated locations or in amplifying the capacity of attendance education, although actually these aspects represent an important change in the educational practice. More than on the above, the transcendence of the theory and practice of this modality lays on the measure in which it proposes guidelines and methodologies which, by being integrated to the processes of a globalized world and of informational societies, permit giving sense and usefulness to the construction of knowledge. Beatriz Fainholc refers as follows to an ample vision of at-a-distance education:

> .... visualize the mediation processes as a sense personal and cultural negotiation, while contributors to the deferred generation of know-how and of the construction of meanings, would excel lineal attitudes in this educational modality (Fainholc, 199:15).

The integration to these processes that characterize the globalized world assumes, on the one hand, adapting the time and space of diverse educational ambits, such as labor training, to the manner in which these dimensions are approached at present in the reality of professional life of institutions and of the economy, as evidenced by an international environment characterized by the growing regional integration and the flow of information that very fast goes beyond the national frontiers. It assumes also, translating the *learning how to know, learning how to do, learning how to live together and learning how to be* (Delors, 1997) proposed by throughout life learning in specific and pertinent methods

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[1] Castells (199: 47) Distinguishes *information society* from *informational society*: The first expression underlines the importance of information in society, while the second concept < <indicates the attribute of a specific form of social organization in which the generation, the processing and the transmission of information become fundamental sources of productivity and power > >.

for each type of institution and academic activity. As an example of the manner in which a training Center with ample trajectory in attendance education approaches the above, we outline below certain aspects of the experience of the Inter-American Center for social Security Studies (CIESS) on the matter of at-a-distance education, an experience that is a reference for the reflection on the construction and diffusion of knowledge at an international level.

At-a-distance education in the CIESS

Among the diversity of focuses and practices offered by at-a-distance education, the CIESS has opted for a guideline that underlines two essential characteristics of this modality: *the configuration of new forms of presence or gathering, on the one hand, and mediation fundamentally through communication resources.*

On the first aspect, what Evans and King have expressed is very eloquent in the sense that at-a-distance education:

> changes the co-presence relations necessary to have access to education, but the consequences are that other forms of co-presence are available or are demanded (as tele-tutoring) and frequent forms of face-to-face co-presence are available or are necessary (for example, regional tutoring or summer schools (Evans and King, 1991: 10).

In accordance with the above, asynchronic or synchronic interactions are made possible and demanded, while at the same time face-to-face interactions acquire a singular nature, because they are included in a process that beforehand is known as predominantly not presential (in traditional terms). This has as a consequence a particular way of constructing knowledge, which in turn implies challenges in the institutional

ambit, as the notion of what is public and what is private, the formal and informal education and the relationship between learning and application in the labor context, for example are transformed. In the case of the CIESS, these characteristics represent an advantage to propose a relationship between the Center, social security institutions and officials who participate in training activities in which the participants will have more possibilities for updating, will visualize continuity and application of their training, intra and inter-institutional study groups will be propitiated and the attention to heterogeneous groups will be incremented.

With respect to the second characteristic, *mediation fundamentally through communication resources,* it should be pointed out that the proposal of a new form of attendance brings about that the presentation of objectives, tasks, study material and evaluation mechanisms be made through the didactic material. In this manner, the use of communication media saves, in part, the physical distance between teacher and student, because the guidelines outlined correspond to the functions that in an attendance system would demand their coincidence in time and space. Thus, the role of tutor of the CIESS moves away from the merely role of a professor to become an orientator and facilitator of the generation and application of the knowledge process, in the manner proposed by Fainholc.

Likewise, the design of media and contents is aimed at the search for autonomy of the participant, because the proposal of the CIESS seeks to use the development of independent study as one of the best advantages of at-a-distance education.

In this sense, we propose as one of the fundamentals of at-a-distance system, that the construction and design of communication media constitute the link among participants, tutors and the Center itself and, at the same time, that they promote the autonomy of the

participants, profiting from the distance existing among them. This characteristic, apparently contradictory, when seen closely reflects the complementary nature of the two characteristics of the at-a-distance education and an aspect of its complexity.

Towards a net for learning

The incorporation of at-a-distance activities in the academic program of the CIESS, through 16 at-a-distance and semi-presence activities developed from 1998 through 2003, has favored the response to the changing demands for training of social securities institutions and their officials. However, this modality is projected as a strategy for the consolidation of a net for learning with a scope that will cover all the Inter-American ambit of social security. A net for learning, whose configuration is linked to other aspects of the academic proposal of the CIESS and shapes the structure of a net that characterizes the transmission of knowledge and other processes of society, which also have influence on the reality of social security.

A proposal for integral academic services, sets forth the complementary nature of attendance and at-a-distance activities and < <... research, debate, construction of new knowledge, direct consultation of sources of information framed by new technologies... > > (Martínez Villalba, 1999:35).

In this proposal, at-a-distance education gains importance as a group of communication strategies that, as from time-space articulations, will balance independent study and joint learning for educational mediation. In this manner, the participant in a course, interacting through his didactic material, is a node of the net that constitutes the Course, because he can connect with other participants, with the tutors or with the Information Center of the CIESS which in turn is a node linked to other libraries and sources

of knowledge. This makes it possible to implement communication processes for the construction of knowledge, because a < < change in one node of the net generates as a result new information > > (Tiffin and Rajasingham, 1997:60) and makes sense as part of a more ample dimension of the net. This point makes it possible to stress the potentiality of this Studies Center as dynamizing factor of a net that expedites the interaction between persons and entities with influence on the development of social security, such as governmental institutions, international organizations, universities and research centers. With a presence of 40 years on the part of the CIESS in the ambit of specialized training in social security, the challenge has consisted of the growing adaptation of methodologies and modalities used –among them at-a-distance education– to the characteristics of the educational proposals appropriate for Latin American informational societies, such as learning throughout life.

In this manner *learning how to know* social security implies not to eliminate the context of knowledge on a specific field of social security, but to consider the global processes that have influence on it; such is the case of the courses and diploma courses in which the individual economic aspects are always approached in the light of the processes of reform of the health sector, present throughout the continent. Likewise, emphasis is made on the development of convenient skills in the at-a-distance student (knowledge of learning styles, independent use of sources of information, etc.) which has had repercussions on the increased use of tools in order to have access to knowledge.

On the other hand, at-a-distance courses demand the preparation of final papers referred to the application of the contents to the institutional reality of the participant, which facilitates the emphasis in *learning how to do* instead of memorizing or instead of the mere replica of knowledge, in addition to showing the mutual

repercussion of local and global aspects. It may even be pointed out that projects developed as final products of several academic activities, whether at-a-distance or semi attendance, have been incorporated with the pertinent adaptations, as a reference of application of knowledge in the didactic material of the following version of the course. Without being limited to a technical outline of the final project, the courses insist in *learning how to be and learning how to live together*, which are demonstrated in the efficient and responsible exercise which is the obligation of the participant as social security official.

It should be mentioned, finally, that if in the consolidation of a net for learning with the demands mentioned, the advantageous use of technological resources is very useful, the true overcoming of frontiers which is required with the internationalization of knowledge, is fulfilled in the measure that reconstructions and applications are incorporated which, from the local ambits, contribute to the circulation of information, the sense of which is found only in the possibility of joining together a know-how that will permit facing the reality in all its dimensions. In this scenery, the perspective of at-a-distance education is promising because it is focused, not to the gathering of persons to transmit knowledge, but to propitiate that by giving sense to the transmission of knowledge, the gathering of persons and institutions is motivated.

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