LEARNING STYLES AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Simposio 5

Abstract: This article presents the Learning Styles Theory as an methodological alternative to the modality of Distance Education, based on Honey, Alonso and Gallego's approach. Each student has its own way of learning and this implies in adapting teaching process to meet this specificity and vice versa. Thinking teach-learning process in order to achieve a diverse audience requires preparation and techniques that bring effectiveness and quality to the process. This study showed the importance of considering learning styles on didactic structure of teaching-learning process in distance education.

Keywords: Distance Education. Learning. Learning Style.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The society of knowledge is complex, which requires an education that allows life understanding. That comprehension goes further educational institution, it begins on birth and goes until death, of different manners in each individual, of course. However, we can realize that each person develops itself better in such environment, method and situation. Due to that, it is possible to observe that we have different learning styles.

Social organizations have been crossing by a restructuration regarding to violence, wealth and knowledge. Currently, violence and wealth have become more reliant on knowledge, which became to be the main active social element to be continuously thought, analysed and reformulated. In that moment, the suitable preparation of these individuals to the community life, to labor, requires to reflect a lot about learning. Such reflections, done by educational institutions, aim to bring real proposals to the teachers, student and managers practice, valid even for non-formal education.

With these succinct observations it becomes evident the huge responsibility of educational institutions in developing effectively their social role.

This study aims to discuss about the importance of learning styles on Distance Education (DE).

In DE, learning always calls attention, questions to know whether students learn or not. However, it rarely questions itself about the standard principles of distance courses, because it considers all learning types as being the same. Are they all the same? Different? How are they organized? And, if, independently of their didactic structure form, on distance courses do all of them learn the same way? Can all of them to learn with the same learning objects? With the interactive instruments available in the course? In other words, are distance educational programs considering the importance of knowing student learning style?

When planning teach-learning process, to consider the own student learning style or style in a group of students brings out an important way to
empower DE quality, empower access, permanence, and, consequently, a important place in educational institutions.

The Distance Education modality is characterized by teaching and learning through technologies. That modality started to be spread throughout Brazil by the 80s, and consequently, triggered the expansion of formal education, allowing access to people who could not have it as in situ education. From that, in 1996 DE was recognized as an Brazilian Educational modality, supported by the Law of National Education Bases and Guidelines (LDB, initials in Portuguese) nº 9394/96.

DE can happen anywhere, anytime, and to whoever it may concern. But, it does not ensure a process that meet the learning preference of each person, what implies in considering the quality of the offered education.

When we consider that everybody who studies by Distance Education learns or might learn, independently of course, environment or even student kind, we might be hiding the reality, promoting the exclusion on inclusion, when qualifying the DE modality as effective by its own. From this perspective, this study brings elements that contribute to the discussion of learning individualization.

Based on these proofs, it might be possible to defend and raise an important and necessary proposal which give us practical instruments on educational context that become it viable and bring back practices actions and debate of ideas about learning, pointing out the importance of thinking the several manners of learning.

In this context, the general objective of this study is to identify the Learning Style Theory importance to the Distance Education.

It is worthy to mention that this theory brings an approach which aims to know the learning style of each student, the predominant style and the group style in order to help on courses projects planning, teaching-learning process planning. Also helping access and permanence policies planning, vocational orientation activities, techniques utilization for teaching-learning, student and professor self-reflection, and in evaluations. All of that approaches considering
different styles of learning, of teaching, and that analyses by both student and professor might improve teaching process and online learning or even in situ learning.

Thus, that discussion intends to answer: How can Learning Styles Theory contribute with Distance Education? To help us in answering such question, we brought an approach about learning styles based on Honey, Alonso and Gallego’s Learning Styles Theories, which dissertate about learning and teaching diversity among people, proposing ways to improve learning process through student and professor personal conscious.

**A new learning to a new education**

The question of learning is different nowadays, teaching cannot be the unique agent responsible for learning, and a certain type of education cannot be applied to all types of learners. On the other hand, learners have to be active in learning process participation. It is clear the need of identifying student individuals differences and accompanying their learning as an individualized way.

From this point of view, Alonso, Gallego and Honey consider to the learning, and eclectic concept, "Learning is a process of gaining will to change perception or behavior as a result of an experience" (Alonso, Gallego and Honey, 2000, p. 22)².

From the experience comes the need and capacity of change. Experience, understood as a result from the interactions of external and internal stimuli to learning. In agreement with Cortelazzo when he emphasize the different needs of learning nowadays:

> Besides comprehension from the past and the current conscious, it is necessary to anticipate the future and desire changes; consequently, it is also necessary learning how to define, debate, organize and act to make change around us to improve life conditions (CORTELAZZO, 2013, p. 69).

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² Own translation
In this context, we have to look at the many discussions about the importance of understanding how learning process happens, and the variety of possibilities to its achievement shows the need of searching other ways toward this direction.

For strengthening this discussion, Learning Style Theory points out another way when emphasizes the need of considering people's diversity on educational context. These are practical actions which should help to think, an build a more holistic perception about this complex field of study.

It is important to mention the relevance of pedagogic approach on education, and in this case, on Distance Education. Technological innovation reduces time and space borders, but, pedagogic components help it to overcome cultural, psychological, behavior and cognitive distances.

Learning Styles Theory comes to contribute on thinking and discussion of this process. However, what does "learning styles" mean? Let us understand this concept from the Alonso, Gallego and Honey’s (2000) theory.

**Learning style theory**

In educational institution environment it is common to hear the institution is concerned about students' learning. Many experts in education as example, Dewey, Rosseau, Piaget, Rogers, Gardner and Freire have already stated about importance of individualization, to customize education, but, in reality, in practical ways, individualization of teaching-learning is not done at all.

It is exposed here the concept of style under a pedagogic approach, proposed by Alonso, Gallego and Honey (2004, p. 43) that explains styles as "something as a conclusions which we formulate about the way as people act". Helpful results to classify and analyse behavior. They are not standards to be followed\(^3\).

To the mentioned authors, learning styles analyses make easier the way, even it being limited of self-knowledge, and can help individuals on their relationships with social reality.

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\(^3\) Own translation
The definition for Alonso, Gallego and Honey’s Theory, proposed by Keefe (1988) defines Learning Style as "cognitive, affective and physiological tracks, which can be used as indicators of how students realize, make connections and respond to their learning environments" (ALONSO; GALLEGOG; HONEY. 2004, p.48)

Chart 1 - Learning Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Style</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Style</td>
<td>Living the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Style</td>
<td>Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Style</td>
<td>Generalization, hypothesis elaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Style</td>
<td>Application</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To Honey (1986), the ideal would be that each individual was able to practice (active style), think (reflective style), synthesize (theoretical style), elaborate (pragmatic style) as the same way. Honey would desire that all skills were equally partitioned on individual, but it is not too simple; some of them are more able in an area than in another.

When designing courses for distance education students, it is necessary to worry about such individualities. In another context about teacher professional development, Cortelazzo states that,

Designing a technological platform which will allow student access to the knowledge, it is necessary that materials are pedagogically accessible to different student learning styles, as well as adapted regarding space and time limitations of the students (CORTELAZZO, 2008, p. 3).

Thus, bringing Learning Style Theory to educational context aiming to identify the different student learning styles, and point out the main style is important and motivator not only for students but also to professors, tutors and managers. When doing that, they will be improving their own knowledge, their skills, their work. Bourdieu & Passeron mention that educational system, the
way we currently know, is crossing a crisis and only seeing it as a communication system is how we can comprehend:

Knowing from a side relationships which join social or scholar characteristics among different receptors categories in many competence levels (...) and from the other side the evolution categories expressivity characterized by different perception levels, it is possible to build a model which can explain and in a certain way, prevent future transformations on pedagogic relationship (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 2000, p. 119).

Disregarding the heterogeneity within an student group, also on aspects regarding to social origin, scholar path, as well as individual characteristics would be a negligence about the several elements that comprise learning and teaching process.

**Learning in Distance Education**

Human Learning axes have changed due to insertion of new technologies, teaching-learning process has not been the same as it was before. Searching on literature we find classical authors discussing learning theories in a period of time when the use of technologies was not too common in education. Such technologies are today, essential tools for educational institutions to plan practices in DE.

Along with researches investigating this matter, we realize learning theories thought to *in situ* education but being used as a base for distance education learning. In other words, it is not found learning theories for DE, in special regarding its own characteristics. *Is there a gap? Or is it suitable proceed like this?*

Another point to highlight is that the small number of theories regarding DE have been used as support to distance courses although they are fragile from the epistemological view. There is a huge concern regarding instrumental, material and operational apparatus.

Moreover, there is not an unique way to offer DE. It exists under many denomination, as example: on line, formal e-learning, informal e-learning, on
line environment; and under different meanings depending on each course planning or on each institution.

However, these theories are common to be applied as same denomination to courses with different characteristics. Such situation characterizes DE as a complex system, when we think the many dimensions that encompasses its planning, since administrative, pedagogic, social and technological aspects, and even human resources with high qualification to be applied to this modality, which involves several structures.

This scenario evidences the need of investigations, analyses and discussions on this matter. Miranda states that, "specific literature in this field is still not able to cover all questioning, but DE has already an important theoretical postulate" (MIRANDA, 2005, p. 40).

Highlighting:

To these authors, [Holmberg, 1986; Moore, 1989; Garisson, 1993; Keegan, 1996; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Homberg, 2003], we should not took for grant the important overcome done by Distance Education, which has achieved in a short time the hall of the desired educational modalities in all levels. (MIRANDA, 2005, p. 41).

When looking at the DE time line, we find an evolutionary scale in its development, always based on technologies as correspondence studies, electronic communication (radio, TV), internet communication, in other words, DE has its structure molded in didactic of technological bases. It makes us look this educational modality as an opportunity of universal learning, which overcomes physical distance between time, professor and student.

But, does learning happen? How does this learning happen? What kind of learning? The constant technological diversity and innovation bring challenges to Distance Education, and are those challenges being considered when planning didactic structure for these courses? Are they meeting students' desires?

Thus, we can observe that it is not simple discussing about teaching-learning process in DE once there are several methodological, pedagogic and
even psychological approaches that aim to teach and learn as *in situ* education level, however, it has needy in DE level.

**Final comments**

Learning how to learn has become, nowadays, an important element to social survival. Learning is a problem, and to approach learning styles as a concrete and practical proposal is an helpful tool. It helps on professors, managers and learners' action, valid to a formal and informal education, and distance and *in situ* education.

Brazilian education history is characterized by search for quality. We believe that learning styles investigation might contribute to new directions claimed by society and education itself. These investigations are rich in suggestions and practical applications. When thoughts during courses planning, such applications and suggestions may improve teaching-learning process in a creative and innovator way. They are essential to students once they can plan their learning according to their own styles, choosing better ways to learn that can amplify their possibilities of gaining knowledge. As well as to teachers, who can better adapt their own teaching style to students' leaning style.

Studies about this thematic are still in insignificant number; that is a challenge to Learning Style Theory, but, the major challenge is to introduce this application into our pedagogic culture. Learning style identification implies in recognizing the student as main agent in its learning process, and the comprehension of this by the own student, its learning style origins can cause a self-knowing of social, culture and affective relationships. This process of self-knowing comprises cognitive aspects involved on learning. Research developments that show suggestion on learn styles improvement can contribute to the empowerment of this work.

Toward this direction, we conclude this article calling attention to the need of strengthening practical instruments development toward teaching-learning quality. In addition, development of tools that can induce discussion
and action on this theme and to the educative process aiming to achieve
effective learning processes.

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