

TEACHERS PORTAL OF UFSCAR: A BRAZILIAN EXPERIENCE OF TEACHER EDUCATION AND ONLINE PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

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Abstract

This article aims to report the experience of Brazilian Website Teachers Portal of UFSCar (www.portaldosprofessores.ufscar.br), to explore the potential and possibilities offered by this proposal to teacher professional development and to point challenges to be overcome in the context of internet use as a training space. The theoretical framework is based on considerations about distance education in Brazil and it is used according to the needs of achievement goals related to teachers' number in this country. From this perspective, in 2004, it was created the Teachers Portal of Federal University of São Carlos, dedicated to professional development of teachers in early stage, as well as experienced ones. It is also a propitious place to research about teacher learning and other topics. Data gathers information on the general profile of registered users, the available sections on Portal and the courses offered by the site that focus on continuing teacher education. This information indicates the Portal as an important tool for teacher professional development, which serves a large number of people. However, some facts as the high demand, the lack of trained professionals and evasion are challenges to be overcome. On the other hand, the Portal contributes to researches related to teacher training and teacher learning, besides being a material repository, source of experience reports and other open access resources that provide knowledge and sharing of ideas to users, who can also contribute to the construction of each section. The Teachers Portal is an environment of training and research that is constantly evolving.

Keywords: Teachers Portal of UFSCar; Distance Education; Teacher Education; Teacher Professional Development; Teacher Learning.

1. First words: some considerations about distance teacher education in Brazil

Distance education is a new modality of formation in Brazilian educational context and it was inserted in Brazil in the beginning of twentieth century with mass media, such as mail, radio (Mugnol, 2009) and television (Netto & Giraffa, 2015). At first, it was used only for basic education. Then, distance education developed because of the needs to supply higher education demands, especially for people who had no access to it because of economic reasons or geographical distance.

The first governmental projects, created in the 70's, stimulate technology implementation in various sectors of the country, including schools and teacher training for technology uses in the classroom. However, it was not aimed to train teachers through these strategies (Santos, 2011).

In 1997, the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) created the National Program of Computing in Education (PROINFO), which focuses on the use of technologies in the school routine and the distribution of technology equipment to schools. Through PROINFO, the Brazilian Federal Government provides continuing training to basic education teachers so that they are able to use technology in the classroom. At the present time, PROINFO is active and offers training with an average duration of 60 hours that can be performed by managers, teachers and educational technicians who

are part of the technological equipped schools or not (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Following the development of distance education in Brazil, there was a considerable increase in research about this subject. Considering the interfaces, methods and interaction with students, the process of legalization of distance educational process has begun in Brazil, aiming to support the expansion of this modality, especially because it represents an advantage for country's higher education (Mugnol, 2009).

In advance of this context, in 1996, the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education was established and it states that, by 2006, all Brazilian basic education teachers should have academic training, since many were formed in technical teaching model and had no higher education. This law, perhaps, may be one of the possible causes of distance education expansion via Internet in Brazil, as the country should meet the demand for training that was created (Nova &Alves, 2003).

In 2005, the distance education was officially recognized as a training form in all levels of education, including continuing education (Shulünzen Júnior, 2009). In addition, to regulate this educational modality, the Open University of Brazil (UAB) began to authorize Brazilian public universities to develop high distance education courses.

According to 2013 Censo EaD.Br (ABED, 2013), in 2013 there were 1772 fully distance courses regulated in Brazil, the majority (52%) being post-graduate courses. The number of students enrolled in these fully distance courses was 692,279 in 2013, and about 64% of enrollments were in undergraduate courses.

Consequently, the access to higher education is overcoming geographical and temporal barriers, providing conditions of university education to a part of the population that previously had no access to it, greatly increasing the number of people with higher education in Brazil (Ferreira &Mill, 2014).

The teacher education in Brazil already occurs largely through distance education, as well as continuing education for teachers. Thus, it is necessary to be cautious about planning courses that focus on teacher education, since these individuals are adults and are already in the professional career. One precaution is the importance of providing and stimulating reflections about the teaching work, remembering to perform bridges between practice and theory (Reis &Battini, 2014).

The development of courses in the online environment implies changes in teaching and learning processes, enabling the discussion about technology, which continuously changes, facilitating access to information (Massetto, 2014). Additionally, continued distance teacher education is an alternative to the barriers faced by teachers - lack of time, several hours of work and financial matters - when they decide to continue their education, as this modality offers flexible hours and exceeds the spatiotemporal barriers (Orth et al., 2013; Garcia, Bizzo &Fazio, 2014).

Therefore, the continued distance education should be planned so that the teacher can perform an active and reflective role, which will be developed both inside and outside the virtual environment. The knowledge generated in the teaching practice is the basis for learning new knowledge and skills in continuing education, mediated by reflection and exchange of ideas with peers (Garcia, Bizzo & Fazio, 2014).

2. Teachers Portal of UFSCar: a continuing distance education initiative

The focus of this text is the website Teachers Portal of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar)(www.portaldosprofessores.ufscar.br), which is a learning virtual environment dedicated to the continuing education of teachers and the online professional support. The objectives here are to report the experience of the Brazilian Website Portal Teachers of UFSCar, explore the potential and possibilities offered by it to the distance teacher professional development and point challenges to be overcome in the context of distance teacher education. In Image 1, it is possible to see Teachers Portal's homepage.

Image 1. Teachers Portal's Homepage



Source: The Teachers Portal of UFSCar.

The Teachers Portal, created in 2004, is developed at the Federal University of São Carlos, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil and is coordinated by professors of the same institution. The main formative objective of this site is to develop projects and activities in distance modality that help the educational needs of experienced, beginners and all levels of education teachers. It also provides access to information by teachers and the formation of learning communities inserted in the internet (Reali, Tancredi & Mizukami, 2010).

Academically, the Teachers Portal is configured as an environment for conducting research about teacher learning and teacher professional development through virtual environments, involving several partnerships between schools and universities. Research conducted on the site brings along improvements in its own courses and programs, setting up a cycle of research results and application of knowledge (Reali, 2011).

In recognition of its relevance to teacher training, the Teachers Portal of UFSCar was included in the Guide of Educational Technologies (Ministry of Education, 2011) as an innovative technology dedicated to education by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC).

The Teachers Portal has a registration system for users that currently has about 14,000 education professionals and from other areas of knowledge, as well as graduation and basic education students. In addition to a wide range of areas, users are also from all Brazilian states.

Portal users are benefited by a wide range of training that are offered and several sections of open access, fed with diversified academic and information materials that are related to teaching, education and training, completely free. It is important to note that the sections and the training offered, which are totally distance ones, can be considered information and communication technologies (ICT) focused on teacher training and professional development (Reali, 2011).

The initiatives undertaken by Teachers Portal are based on the assumption that teacher training starts while the teacher is still a student before joining the higher education and that this training is continuous throughout his personal and professional life. Thus, the methodologies adopted in formations favor the individual and collective reflection about the professional practice, involving considerations about adult learning and characteristics of their professional activities (Rodrigues et al., 2013).

The different activities in the Teachers Portal can be divided into two categories: courses/programs and sections. The courses and programs that are offered are training initiatives, generally for beginning and/or experienced teachers in order to promote their professional development and improve teaching practice. Each formation has a number of available spaces, as well as well-defined criteria that guide participants' selection, since the number of applications generally surpasses the number of available vacancies.

Among the formations are evident the Mentoring Program and Teaching Cases that were highlighted in Guide of Educational Technology, cited above, as important teacher training courses (Reali, 2013), and the Online Mentors Education Program, that was recently finished and was an extension of Mentoring Program.

The sections are represented by spaces within the site that gather information of diversified types, but that are always related to school education and teacher training. Among others sections, it is possible to highlight the Library and Publications, which includes academic publications, experience reports, thesis, dissertations and articles. Glossary of Education is another one, which is configured as an educational dictionary that is in constant construction and with more than a thousand entries. There are also Ask For Who Knows It, where users can make methodological, theoretical and practical questions that will be answered by academic experts; and Featured Schools, section dedicated to the dissemination of innovative educational experience in Brazilian schools.

Reali (2011) points out that, with the numerous sessions and trainings, the Teachers Portal seeks to meet the education needs of teachers from various educational levels through the online initiative. Besides, it provides professional support to teachers promoting their professional and personal well-being, making their adaptation easier to everyday practice; assists teachers in overcoming doubts, anxieties and fears faced with teaching exercise at different times of career; helps to stay in the teaching profession; encourages the reflective action in-service; provides self-assessment and reorganization of workskills, among others.

The following is the report that evaluates the basic profile of the Portal users, the training demand evidenced by data collected on the site and some considerations about the relevance of the sections, the training offered, the possibilities and the challenges

that still have to be overcome.

3. User's profile: training demands for the practice improvement

The data that are explored below were collected in Portal Teachers of UFS Car through three sources: a tool that records accesses and statistical data; an investigation about users profile conducted in 2016 by the Portal management team for the period 2004-2014; and an investigation about the courses offered by Portal in the same period (2004-2014), with information about available vacancies and applications.

3.1 Teachers Portal UFSCar users profile

By December 2014, the portal had 13,596 registered users, and had received its highest number of registrations in 2011 (3452). Among Portal users, the majority (73%) comes from the states of the Southeast region, and 62% of all users are concentrated in São Paulo. However, there are users in all Brazilian states.

Most users (64%) are aged between 30 and 50 years. However, the age range is from less than 20 years to more than 60, showing that the Teachers Portal meets a wide range of generations, which has the most diverse demands.

About 75% of users are teachers, coordinators or directors, while others occupy the position of students (usually of higher education) or perform another activity, such as managers, systems analysts and engineers, for example. Among teachers, 43% has taught in elementary school, while the others are distributed in the other basic education levels.

3.2 Most accessed section

Between 2004 and 2014, the site received more than 1 million 200 thousand accesses, and the year with the highest number is 2011, with 255,906 hits. The section that received more hits was the Links section, which provides a series of website links that are related to education, science and culture, as suggestion materials for teachers and access to information. This session received 15% of all accesses.

In second place is Distance Courses section, which received 14% of all accesses. This section is the space where users can subscribe to selective process of the available courses and it contains information about the courses in progress, closed ones and with open enrollment. When a course of the site is available, users are informed via e-mail with information about the desired profile and the selective process.

The third most accessed section was Moodle (12%), which is a virtual learning environment, where the courses and formations occur. Moodle has been used by the Teachers Portal since 2009, which enabled the increase of available spaces, the variability of possible activities and better opportunities for discussion and interaction among participants.

Then Glossary of Education got 8% of accesses. This is the previously reported dictionary and is powered with entries written by post graduate students of Federal University of São Carlos and by Portal users who wish to help, always with an authorization of publication term.

The other 66% of accesses are distributed among the other 25 existing sections, such as: Didactic Material (which gathers educational videos that can be used in the classroom); Agenda of Education (which reports on national and international educational events); among others, totaling 29 sessions.

The site also features monthly surveys with questions about the school routine, satisfaction with the profession and other issues that can be answered by users. There is also the Portal Blog, the Video Gallery, Ask For Who Knows It, Featured Schools, Library and Publications, and others. It is important to point out that all sections are able to receive users' contributions.

4. Offered Courses: available vacancies and demands

The offer of distance courses on the Teachers Portal began in 2004 with the Mentorship Program, whose objective was the escort of beginning teachers (up to 5 years of career) by experienced teachers, the mentors. The mentors' training was taken through face modality and it happened weekly, in meetings with the Mentorship Program researchers. The mentoring of beginning teachers by mentors took place via Internet, through internal messages (such as e-mail) on the Teachers Portal, as the site did not have a virtual learning environment yet.

Then, in 2006, the Teaching Cases course was developed and also occurred through internal messages, posts and discussions about teaching cases in a forum allocated on the Portal. The course had 9 mentors and 30 teachers attended, among beginners and experienced.

In 2009, the virtual learning environment Moodle was inserted on the Portal, a fact that has increased the number of offered courses and available vacancies. From 2004 to 2014, the Teachers Portal offered about 53 courses and training programs. These courses include continuing training initiatives to experienced teachers and beginners and subjects offered by the online Pedagogy course of UFSCar. Here, we focused on courses offered by the Portal, which are 14 (including the Mentorship Program and Teaching Cases).

In the 14 courses, about 510 available vacancies were offered. However, about 7155 applications were received, representing an average of 14 candidates/available vacancies. However, 591 candidates have been accepted in courses, exceeding the number of available vacancies. In Table 1, it is possible to see the discussed data.

Table 1: Relation of courses, available vacancies, application and accepted participants' numbers.

| Course/Program name | Number of available vacancies | Number of applications | Number of accepted participants |
|---|-------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Mentorship Program (2004) | 30 | 680 | 30 |
| Teaching Cases (2006) | 29 | 82 | 29 |
| Formation of Trainers (2009) | 16 | 172 | 16 |
| Writing/Reading process and digital Technologies in education (2009) | 25 | 262 | 37 |
| The diversity in school: reflecting about inclusive pedagogical practices in the classroom (2009) | 30 | 837 | 38 |
| The teaching in the first years of elementary school: reflecting about knowledge base to profession exercise (2010) | 30 | 867 | 43 |
| Constructing the knowledge base to elementary school | 30 | 1142 | 37 |

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| teaching: a proposal of distance continued education of music teachers (2011) | | | |
| Teaching Cases and the theorization of pedagogical practices – literacy teachers (2011) | 30 | 831 | 30 |
| Constructing the knowledge base to elementary school teaching: a proposal of distance continued education of music teachers (2012) | 30 | 156 | 23 |
| Narratives of mathematics and Portuguese Language formation (2012) | 60 | 384 | 57 |
| Formation of trainers of the first years of elementary school: education and (auto)biographical courses (2013) | 30 | 405 | 42 |
| Narratives of mathematics and Portuguese Language formation (2013) | 60 | 718 | 84 |
| Mentor Education Online Program (2014) | 50 | 72 | 72 |
| Mentor Education Online Program – second class (2014) | 60 | 547 | 53 |
| TOTAL | 510 | 7155 | 591 |

Source: The Teachers Portal of UFSCar.

5. Discussions and final considerations: possibilities and challenges

The data collected in the Teachers Portal suggest it as a useful environment to continuing teacher education and to support beginning professionals or already experienced. It is considered that teacher education is continuous (Cole & Knowles, 1993) and this feature is taken into account in all Portal's planned activities and tools, enabling and encouraging reflective practice and collaborative construction.

However, the training of teachers via the Internet, as well as to provide the necessary support, is not a simple task, even though the site has a well-defined and coordinated methodological basis. The main challenge perceived in the data is a great demand for continuing education in different areas, as evidenced by the number of applications in the courses and programs.

The difficulty in providing a greater number of available vacancies is the lack of skilled professionals to meet the needs of a greater number of participants, mainly because the education modality is through distance. In other words, besides being teacher trainers, their knowledge base for teaching (Shulman, 1987) must contain skills of teaching via internet (Tancredi & Reali, 2011).

In Table 1, it is possible to see that some courses had fewer accepted students when compared to the number of available spaces. This could be due to lack of members who fit the required criteria of selection. On the other hand, in many courses, available spaces were exceeded by the number of accepted students, which shows the organizers effort to attend as many people as possible.

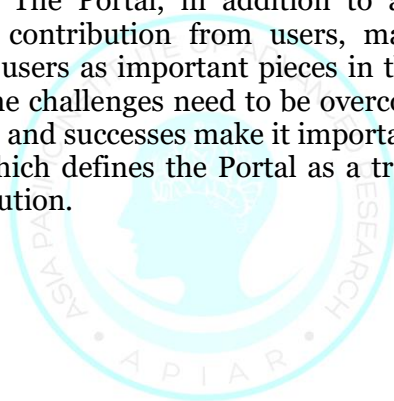
Another challenge not evidenced by data, but known among distance learning courses (as well faced modality), is the students' evasion, which requires research for the development of teaching methods that can reduce these problems. It is suggested that the Teachers Portal could be a useful environment for such investigations, because it has space and formation demands that could allow these researches, as well as having a team of versatile trainers and from different knowledge areas.

The fact that the Portal has users from all Brazilian states offers a great cultural variability, providing rich discussions and exchange of experiences to formations, besides allowing the addition of different materials from different regions to the sections. The same can be said about the users' experiences and professions, which are diverse.

Reali (2011), in her study, suggests the need to develop tools and methodologies that reflect the implicit knowledge of the participants, taking into account their experiences and trajectories and stimulating reflective research, while being a flexible curriculum. Here, it is reiterated the need to develop this kind of tool or methodology, which will be useful for research about teacher professional development and teacher learning, besides enabling the improvement of distance training carried out by the Teachers Portal.

As possibilities, the Teachers Portal can be used to train teachers to work in its own courses, increasing the number of available spaces. It is also possible to increase the quantity of courses, because Moodle allows a great number of this since the Portal's server is compatible and has sufficient space.

The Teachers Portal of UFSCar is configured as a relevant tool for continuing teacher education in the Brazilian educational context, according to the large amount of possibilities offered by it. The Portal, in addition to all formations, also provides sections that can receive contribution from users, making the site a free access knowledge library and the users as important pieces in the Portal's construction. Like many other initiatives, some challenges need to be overcome, as well as some will still emerge, but its possibilities and successes make it important. Therefore, it is possible to agree with Reali (2011), which defines the Portal as a training and research tool that remains in continuous evolution.



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