



**SOCIAL INCLUSION:
one of the main challenges of distance education¹**

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ABSTRACT

At a moment when the new technologies have come to mediate the process of literacy, it is of utmost importance to discuss the effectiveness and complexity of interactive distance education for social inclusion in a geographically vast and culturally heterogeneous country like Brazil. In this context, our aim is to develop the project “**Cross-cultural encounters in Distance Education: Life Narratives from the different Brasiles**” designed at the Portuguese, English and Spanish course of Universidade Paulista, Brasil with educational centers all over the country. The project relates students’ communities from the different educational centers, connected through Distance Education through **life narratives** Smith and Watson (2010).

Keywords: Distance Education. Social inclusion. Life narratives.

RESUMO

No momento presente quando as novas tecnologias estão mediando o processo de letramento se faz importante discutir a efetividade e complexidade da interação implícita na Educação a Distância (EaD) para a inclusão social em um país geograficamente vasto e culturalmente heterogêneo como o Brasil. Entendemos que apesar de problemas como um apropriado sistema de letramento digital, acesso adequado à comunicação tecnológica, como assim também a possibilidade de enfrentar os custos financeiros, a EaD pode ainda ser efetiva no Brasil porque alcança lugares de difícil acesso, afastados dos centros universitários e assim coloca em contato as grandes metrópoles com áreas rurais ao tempo que contribui para encurtar distâncias de classe, gênero e diferenças étnicas e raciais entre os brasileiros que pertencem a diferentes âmbitos da nação.

Palavras-chave: Educação a Distância (EaD). Inclusão social. Narrativas de vida.

1 INTRODUCTION

At a moment when the new technologies have come to mediate the process of literacy, the aim of this paper is to discuss the effectiveness and complexity of

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interactive distance education for social inclusion in a geographically vast and culturally heterogeneous country like Brazil. The main argument is that in spite of issues of proper digital literacy, access to communication technology and affordability, distance education can still be effective in Brazil because it reaches places of difficult access, far away from university centers, puts in contact the big metropolis with the countryside at the time that contributes to bridging class, gender and ethnic distances among Brazilian citizens from different walks of life. Along those lines, this paper discusses how distance education has been implemented and developed at a private university located in the city of São Paulo with educational centers all over the country in order to create an inclusive teaching and learning environment. In particular, it considers the project **“Cross-cultural encounters: Life Narratives from the different Brazils”**. Designed within the Portuguese and English course of this institution, the project aims at relating students’ communities from all over the country through narrative, in particular **life narratives** defined by Smith and Watson (2010) in the following terms:

We take life narrative as a general term for acts of self-representation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic or digital. In other words, we employ the term life writing for written forms of the autobiographical, and life narrative to refer to autobiographical acts of any sort. (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 4).

This style of autobiography is profoundly encompassing and democratic since it considers narratives of so-called ordinary citizens that have historically been ignored as having no value by traditional autobiography that focuses mainly on the lives of outstanding personalities of the community.

In turn, Distance Education makes the project feasible by embracing the context of the learner and centering the activity on the student and their community. It does so by bridging space and problematizing the concept of distance at a geographical, temporal and transactional level. As Tori (2010, p. 9) points out, the meaning of Distance Education is generally defined as the “absence of the teacher”. However, the concept is a bit more complex. Focusing on the learner, there are three possible distance relationships in the learning-teaching process: student-teacher; student-student; student-content. In turn for each one of these relationships there are three types of distances: spatial, temporal and transactional. Spatial distance refers to the physical separation between the student and the teacher, the other students and the student and the content.



Temporal distance refers to synchronic activities such as chats and asynchronous activities, deferred in time, such as discussion forums. Finally, transactional activity is the psychological feeling of being apart from the others that can happen both in a traditional or distance education process. Likewise, the concept of distance is linked to that of presence; as Tori ads, both are related in Distance Education by all its technological tools that actually shorten the distance among the different parts involved no matter how far geographically they might be.

It is this quality of Distance Education that actually fosters the project of life narratives because it helps bring together otherwise far away communities by deconstructing the center-margin dichotomy and multiplying the center into the myriad locations of students' contexts, thus allowing the different narratives to attain not only more visibility but also new layers of signification when they are read in a relational manner: one in terms of the others. It thus contributes to creating among students, in the first moment, a feeling of self-confidence when they see their own narratives projected beyond their own locus of enunciation and, in the second moment, a renewed sense of citizenship when they see their own narratives, among many others, and become aware that one should see one's beliefs as one set of values rather than as a representation of how the world **is**, in this case, how a unique and homogenous Brasil **is**. As Smith and Watson point out:

Life archives aim to be both educational and restorative or healing. They encourage community building and memorialization of the past through breaching differences and identifying shared values. The effort to build collective memory, one story at a time, strives for a participatory citizenship. Such projects of collective storytelling, whether published as books, film documents, recordings or digital media, situate the individual story in the larger metanarrative of a nation's social history, as "history from below" binding both tellers and listeners to the nation as imagined community (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 189).

The project of life narratives, mediated by Distance Education, is thus turned into a process of social inclusion because its goal is not solely to provide instruction from an educational center but to create a learner-centered environment that leads students to produce knowledge, rather than reproduce received information. This shows that there is a clear convergence between life narratives and the technology that mediates them in interactive Distance Education. If life narratives, as Smith and Watson (2010, p. 189) observe, have as their goal a participatory citizenship through storytelling, there are three constitutive elements in transactional distance in Distance



Education that contribute to the same aim (TORI, 2010, p. 9). The first one is **dialogue** and the possibility of interaction among the parts involved that actually binds tellers and listeners and readers and helps them reimagine the national community; the second, the **flexibility of the structure of the program**, in other words, the fact that it allows the students to choose the tools with which to narrate their own stories: the written word, video, photography, etc.; the third, the **student's autonomy**. According to Dillon and Greene (2003, p. 235), one of the main differences between distance and traditional learners is that the first ones learn in more independent environments. What is at stake in this consideration is that learners' cognitive styles are not unique and constant but very much depend on their own social and learning contexts. This becomes manifest in the students' choosing of both subject of their narrative, meaningful to their communities, as well as of the technology that mediates them.

2 THE VALUE OF NARRATIVES AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance Education has been repeatedly discredited because it is argued that the students of this modality lack full membership in the academic community (GRANGER; BOWMAN, 2003, p. 177). One possible way to overcome this hurdle, as the authors go on to add, is by involving students in metacognitive activities like life narratives that explore identities, living and learning styles and show the student's relationship to the learning environment through an analysis of their own community and their place in it. These explorations through narratives are foremost to help students find their voices within and without their own cultural contexts as well as communicate with their peers from other communities and, in particular, learning communities that, in this case, are part of a continental nation like Brasil.

Defining narratives like **ceremonies of belief**, J. Edward Chamberlin (2007, p. 1) explains "that stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; they bring us close to the world we live by taking us into a world of words; they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart". Narratives are therefore a space where we can reflect about who we are, how much our community signifies to us and how we relate to the world. More important, perhaps, they are meaningful not only to affirm our identities but also to question them because they help us de familiarize our everyday life that, due to habit, becomes almost invisible, or worse, naturalized: "[...] stories always have something strange about them, and this is what first takes hold of us, making us



believe. Recognizing the strangeness in other people's stories, we see and hear it in our own" (CHAMBERLIN, 2007, p. 1). In the process of becoming critical of the others with whom we relate, we come to criticize ourselves. As stories tell about our beliefs and traditions, they tell us where we come from and why we are where we are, they are "not only chronicles of events but ceremonies of beliefs" because "stories and songs give us a way to believe, and ceremonies sustain our faith"(CHAMBERLIN, 2007, p. 2).

It is this communal aspect of narratives, that aims at social inclusion, that life narratives recover and set them apart from traditional autobiography. As Smith and Watson (2010, p. 13) remark, life narrators go beyond the narrative of their own individual selves or the chronicle of an event: they actually make "history" because they "enshrine their community" in their own narratives and so "justify their perceptions, uphold their reputations, dispute accounts with others, settle scores, convey cultural information and invent desirable futures". Hence, life narratives can be read as autobiographical **acts** because the fact of being situated in a story, as the authors argue, means that they are situated in "place and time" and, therefore they can be read as "crucial interactions with the world" in the sense that "they are addressed to an audience/reader; they are engaged in an argument about identity" (SMITH; WATSON, 2003, p. 63).

In other words, life narratives imply some form of agency that can give rise to a new and differentiated kind of experience because they are enmeshed in the life of the community. Clearly the relation between narratives and the community is a dynamic process always open to change. Narratives always originate and move back into the community. In this process, they do not remain the same, since they are subjected to multiple interpretations that help envision the social experience from which they emerged in a differentiated manner.

This bringing together of people from different walks of life not necessarily implies a harmonic relationship. Rather, many times it might produce conflict; however, it may be productive. Gerald Graff (1993, p. 108) says that what needs to be narrated is the conflict among the different communities focusing, precisely, on themes such as agency, gender, ethnicity, identity, locality. He adds that "contrast is fundamental because no idea is an island; to become intelligible, it must be understood in relation to other ideas". For him, the best way to deal with conflict is by making it our object of study instead of erasing it or establishing a false harmony. That leads us to review both



our values and the values of Others because being in contact with narratives from other cultural contexts leads us to become familiar with different epistemologies and, therefore, with other cultures' needs and beliefs.

This turns the writing and the reading of life narratives into an instance of social action and inclusion because they become a common ground that as Chamberlin points out “[...] is neither a spot of land nor a set of stories. It is a state of mind in which we accept that the categories of reality and the imagination are like the categories of THEM and US” (CHAMBERLIN, 2007, p. 239).

Also very importantly, they help us problematize the concept of **home** or community as being the place where we live or the place we belong to and from where we articulate our life narratives. Sometimes we like it and sometimes we do not: “It may be all of these things or none of them. Whatever and wherever it is, home is always border country, a place that separates and connects us, a place of possibility for both peace and perilous conflict” (CHAMBERLIN, 2007, p. 3). The concept of home, says Chamberlin, is a nest of contradictions and conflicts because its population is not homogeneous, but profoundly heterogeneous.

At the same time, Smith and Watson (2010, p. 69) observe that the **site** of the life narratives are as meaningful as the narratives themselves. These sites of narration “perform cultural work” in the sense that “they organize the personal storytelling on which they rely”. These sites, they go on to add, are “multilayered matrices” and can be “personal, institutional or geographical” and, to some extent all three levels “overlap”.

Brydon and Coleman (2008, p. 7) remark that the term **community** has traditionally been utilized to refer to small social groups that function at a local level and imply in a direct relationship among persons. Although that meaning has not disappeared, it was first extended to refer to imaginary forms of relationship among big social structures like the nation and today, in the era of technology, the term has been reinvented to refer to groups of people that have some kind of filiation but are not limited by the geographical space since they connect through the virtual space. Such is the case of our Distance Education course that has educational centers throughout the country. Therefore, the sites of the life narratives that make up our project are located in different types of communities encompassing from the big metropolis to rural areas or wilderness; low income to high income communities in which the individual struggles with environmental, familial, political issues. This is why, Smith and Watson (2010, p. 71) remark that “*site*, more actively than notions of place or setting, speaks of the



situated ness of autobiographical narration” that, as suggested is engrained in the quality of the narrative.

And it is here that both life narratives and Distance Education come together to complement each other. First, it is in the realm of narratives where we can reimagine who We are and also who the Others that make up our own culture are. Then, it is also in the realm of narratives that we can turn the other into somebody more familiar to Us, at the time that We become familiar to Them.

The virtual realm of Distance Education functions as an enabling locus at different levels. First, it brings into contact people whose stories are as varied as the geographical and social landscapes that make up the nation, whose customs, habits, needs and desires are different from each other, though all of them make part of the same national community. Second, it is a site open to narratives in all types of media that are read in counterpoint. As Smith and Watson (2010, p. 95) explain, we usually think about life narrative in written form; however, it is also possible to dramatize the self through other kinds of media like short feature, documentary film, theater pieces, performances in art and music, dance, cyber art, among others. Distance Education offers a friendly space to all these forms of narrative. Finally, choice of media has to do with the form that best expresses the narrator’s story and subjectivity. In this sense, as Smith and Watson (2010, p. 168) also remark, “the medium is not only constitutive of the subjectivity rendered” but also “expands the field of self-representation beyond the literary to the cultural” because as they “revise notions of identity and the rhetoric and modalities of self-representation they bring about new forms of virtual sociality that are enabled by concepts of community that do not depend on personal encounter”. In other words, technology and digital literacy become an extension of the individual’s subjectivity and the basis on which new forms of sociability are structured.

3 THE PROJECT: Distance Education and life narratives. Looking for common ground. Definitions.

In this context, the main aim of the project: **“Cross-cultural encounters: Life Narratives from the different Brasiles”** is the building of an archive of life narratives by students and members of the students’ different communities from all over Brazil mediated by the web and technological tools of Distance Education in the form of written narratives, video and image tic media. We understand that the relevance of this



project lies in the fact that this kind of narratives can be both, educational, since they contribute to Brazilians getting to know each other and living together in spite of class, ethnic and genre differences, and healing because in coming closer to the Other of our own communities it might help us overcome past differences and imagine a future together. This project, as already stated, has as its goal participatory citizenship because it places the individual's life narrative in the context of the larger narrative of the nation. Besides, rather than being a national history narrated from above, it is historical narrative told from below, from the ordinary citizen's perspective.

It is inspired in the project by the MEC, Brazilian Ministry of Education's project: "Gênero e Diversidade na Escola Formação de Professoras / e sem Gênero, Sexualidade, Orientação Sexual e Relações Étnico-Raciais" (2006, p. 10) that argues that though Brazil has obtained important results in the field of the fights for the equality of gender and ethnic-racial differences and, in general for the respect of cultural diversity, there is still a long way to go in the field of respect and value of cultural differences. Discrimination due to gender, ethnic-racial questions and sexual orientation are still today present in Brazilian life. As is well-known, laws against any kind of discrimination are not enough in themselves if there is not a transformation in the mentality and practices of the population. Therefore, actions that promote the discussion of these themes, through individual and collective reflection and contribute to the elimination of any type of prejudice are welcome. In particular actions in the field of education. The document goes on to add, that the project was developed for professors of Distance Education.

One of the main aims of the Ministry's project is to develop a critical attitude with respect to the naturalization of difference promoted by social and political inequality (15). The idea is to promote an open debate always remembering that the outcome should not be frozen in some final document that promotes a doctrine of any kind. Just the opposite. The school needs to be always ready to present not an absolute truth but a reflection that allows students to understand ethical implications as well as different policies on the subject that will permit them to build their own positions and opinions on this debate (15). In this sense, we believe that our project is foremost because with its far reaching arm, mediated by technological tools, Distance Education contributes to giving voice to silenced citizens in faraway places when it puts a myriad narratives in counterpoint that do not resolve in some kind of ultimate truth, but that when read one next to the other they gain new signification and relevance.



Distance Education thus help bridge vast geographical and temporal connecting different landscapes like the rural Brazilian Northeast with the rich and prosperous pampas in the South, the immensity of the Amazon, in the heart of the nation, with mega polis such as São Paulo. As the document goes on to add, if, on the one hand, Brazil is a country in which its inhabitants share a cultural universe and a language, on the other hand it is a complex society characterized by its internal diversity that encompasses immigrants from countries all over the world, African-Brazilian and indigenous communities. However, to talk about diversity does not rely solely in taking into account the origin of the different families that make up the national community but to be aware of cultural differences within those same families as well as the relationship among the different families, in particular because we find subjects that due to gender, ethnic or racial affiliation, religion and sexual orientation are defined by their own personal histories (24).

3.1 Targets and Specifications: Objectives of the Project

In the spirit of this document, the main objective of this project is to humbly contribute to the school's mission of furnishing students, future professors, with a critical view on their right to citizenship and respect of differences through the means of the technology provided by Distance Education and the writing of life narratives. The specific objective of this project is to build a collective memory through life narratives that discusses cultural diversity, in particular gender and ethical-racial issues that might be instructive to our and future generations.

3.2 Methodology: Writing and Collecting Life Narratives

In the first moment, students who volunteer to participate in the project will be asked to read bibliography on Distance Education, Social Inclusion and Life Narratives. This bibliography will be suggested by the professors and tutors participating in the project. Discussions on the theoretical readings and the development of the project will be organized in a forum with professors and tutors of the Portuguese and English Course of the University.

As regards the topic of the life narratives, they should be organized around common experiences that tell about the national diversity from a personal view: issues



of gender ethnic and racial difference as well as religious and sexual orientation. The thematic rubric, however, will be decided jointly by the students and the school. While some topics will be suggested, students will be consulted as what topics are of relevance to them so that their own perspective is taken into account. Thus, the project should manifest a common effort to build a sense of community through shared stories and values. We understand that these narratives are educational, healing and restorative.

Life narratives will be related through a common theme seen from different perspectives that rather than do away with differences, as already stated, will highlight the conflict among them, as mediated by spatial, temporal and cultural location. This related and intertextual reading will become a contact zone among writers and readers. These narratives can take the form of contemporary **bildungsroman**, rights narratives, narratives of grief and reparation, activist narratives, narratives of family, auto ethnography. (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 127).

In turn, the register of these narratives will be written: students narrating their own stories or registering other people's stories and video or photographic narratives. In the discussion forums students' attention will be called to the fact that as Smith and Watson (2010, p. 63) observe, "memory, experience, identity, spatial location, embodiment and agency are not separable constituents of autobiography". Rather they are all implicated into one another. However, in order to understand the situated quality of a story there are different aspects that should be taken into account that go to reveal that "autobiographical acts are anything but simple or transparent". Therefore, attention should be paid to a set of categories highlighted by Smith and Watson (2010, p. 64) such as, sites; producers of the story: autobiographical Is; the Others of Autobiographical Is; voice; addressees; modes of self-enquiry; patterns of employment; media of the narrative; audiences; para textual frames.

Students-narrators will read and organize the narratives received in an online book, video and photograph archive with a critical introduction written by themselves. Likewise narratives will be organized in terms of topic and type of narratives. This online book will be posted in the platform of the course and it is expected that members of the school community will act as a responsive community not only by reading the narratives but also by posting their comments on the narratives thus turning it into a dynamic, interactive and open archive.



4 FINAL WORDS

As can be seen in this project, first the Portuguese and English course of this institution provide the opportunity to study for those who, for geographical or economic reasons, do not have the chance to participate in classroom teaching but understand university education as a way to have a meaningful participation in society. Second, the project about the different “Brasiles” brings the so-called region into the center when it dislocates the site and voice of the narratives. Finally, the quality of the narratives go beyond the personal to the communal or national when it addresses themes in order to modestly contribute to overcoming any kind of prejudice.

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