Distance Learning in a Shifting Paradigm

Mário AVELAR
(Universidade Aberta)

In the next pages I'll try to outline those I take as the major issues concerning distance learning in what is supposed to be a shifting paradigm.

In the preface he wrote for a rather important document on the demands of Higher Education for the next ten years in Portugal, Pedro Lynce, our former Minister of Science and Higher Education, stated that: "… institutions of higher education must be encouraged to invest in the area of knowledge society, e-Learning and distance teaching, either at a national level (following the model of Universidade Aberta /Open University), or at an institutional level. (Lynce, 2002: 19)

I take this as a rather important statement, since it means recognition and commitment. First of all the recognition of ICT as a crucial instrument, as an element that has become – and I want to stress this aspect - part of literacy. Besides this also means, rather explicitly, the recognition of the model represented by Universidade Aberta, which also means a recognition of its educational and social agenda developed since its foundation in the late eighties. Last but not the least, this statement should mean a commitment from the government in terms of institutional support.

I would like to put this statement in perspective in the frame of deeper changes that have taken place in western and eastern societies, in the frame of what several authors have considered a shift of paradigm. This shift of paradigm should be anchored on the radical changes provided by *media* and ICT in all the aspects of our daily lives, namely in education. Whenever radical changes take place there's anxiety, and fear. Fear and anxiety may also enhance a sentiment of crisis that we often feel to be subliminal to several approaches made by educators and/or politicians. We often forget that this notion of crisis isn't actually new in western societies. Paul Hazard applied it to 17th century in an essay untitled 'Crisis of European Conscience' where he approached the main psychological changes that were taken place at the time: "logocentric reasoning against traditional believes; the building a new model for humanity." (Barata, 2002: 16) What he means is that Europe was facing a vast process of what Jean Piaget defined as re-balancing required by the emergence of a new reality. This process would develop itself in the next centuries embracing all the spheres of social life.

Education wasn't, obviously, alien to this broader movement of radical social and cultural changes. Significantly a touchstone for the understanding of 19th century Britain was Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, an essay where he analysis an educational system which was forced to face a new reality due to the emergence of new social segments. We must bear in mind that England is one of the countries, such as France and Germany, where the first experiments on distance learning have taken place [Allow me a rather brief digression in order to confess that I can't agree with Otto Peters when in his book published last year, *Distance Education in Transition – News Trends and Challenges*, he figures out a tradition for distance learning going back to St Paul who, according to him, used those that were then the "new technologies" of writing in order to spread his epistles in a hostile environment, thus replacing the so far conventional "face-to-face" preaching, by an "asynchronous preaching" (Peters, 2002: 14)].

As we know the first experiments on distance learning explored the possibilities provided by mass distribution derived by the emergent technologies of mail and railway. These facilities

allowed the contact with sectors of the population who, due to economic and geographical reasons, remained in the fringes of the social system. Another important aspect has to be stressed: these facilities provided solitary interactions. The solitary individual thus becomes the centre of a new educational model. As Börje Holmberg states, in *Distance Education in Essence – An overview of theory and practice in the early twenty-first century*, a book published two years ago where he synthesizes his 1995 classic, *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*, this kind of teaching is paradoxical in its essence, since it is conceived for the masses and is focused on individual responsibility. This is the reason why Holmberg thinks that the only ideological tendency inherent to distance learning is individualism.

This emphasis on the individual, the "atom" according to Condorcet, is also endogenous to the liberal democratic paradigm, which was born in the late 18th century. Major 20th century dystopian fictions, as George Orwell's *1984*, illustrate how utopian strategies turned out to be, after all, mere attempts to annihilate and eventually crush these atoms. Ironically either in *1984*, or in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit*, the media preserves totalitarian power, they manipulate life in several ways; besides they are crucial in the revision of History, and in the building of reality. Though these utopian strategies have been overcome in Western Europe, something still remains: "the *media* conspiracy of silence," as the Portuguese historian Borges de Macedo once named it. When he first used this expression he wasn't meaning a deliberate and systematic attitude developed by the *media*, as we find in Orwell; what he actually meant was something radically anchored on the paradigm we've been living in since the late 18th century, as Oscar Wilde had already stressed in his essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism:" an existence focused on the present; an existence manipulated by representations, by stereotypes which are signs of success, beauty, or power; an existence manipulated by the images which mould our daily life while creating illusions that some may take as the real thing. When Wilde said that "life imitates art", he shouldn't be aware that this was somehow prophetic of our contemporary reality; should we remind that the Sony engineer who created the Walkman got his inspiration in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit* (Sernadas, 2002).

The silence mentioned by Borges de Macedo, derives from two main absences: memory and debate, the late being often replaced by commonplaces rhetoric supported by ideological strategies. From this emerges a rather recurrent confusion, the confusion between information and knowledge. When in Sophocles' *Oedipus in Cologne* the hero defends himself by saying "information is the basis for wise action," he is distinguishing the difference between these two elements. How should we proceed then from an information stage to a higher stage, a stage of knowledge? And when may this knowledge be part of wisdom, as in Titian's painting *Allegory of Prudence*?

The path from information to knowledge that teaching is supposed to stimulate may be rediscovered if we revisit the humanist tradition which takes us back to its major thinkers such as Montaigne. There is a lot to learn from Montaigne, namely his idea that we are part of the world constant movement; stability is thus an illusion, as he wrote, "I may be someone else tomorrow, if I learn something new, something that will eventually change me." Our coherence will depend on the way we'll be able to manipulate this movement of change. The paradigm we've been living in, and whose roots have to be found in late 18th century, is made of that instability, an instability that forces us to define new concepts, new typologies that will frame and define what may be found of original in our daily life. The paradigm we've been living in has stressed speed, in terms

of time, and has simulated the overcoming of space. We may be facing only a stress of emphasis, not a shift of paradigm.

New intellectual articulations provided by ICT are still living its earlier days. So far the pedagogic paradigm has only occasionally incorporated ICT supported strategies and distance learning in its agenda; these still remain marginal, sometimes juicy, elements in the same old pedagogical strategies. In 1995 Burge mentioned the temptation of using the computer screen as a blackboard; a blackboard giving out all the information, even that information that could be better handed out in an ordinary piece of paper (Burge, 1995: 19). Those who are dazzled by ICT brave new world quite often use them in a rather primary way; we should actually say regressive way, as Freud saw it. All of us have already experienced talks supported by *Power Point* where middle-age persons use it in order to process a minimum of key concepts where, occasionally, a cartoon with a dog, a bird, or a flower, emerges. I don't know what you feel whenever you face an experience like this; I, myself, always feel that someone is insulting my intelligence, and I remind the words of the Australian poet Gwen Harwood: "Christ, keep my anger sharp in me." This actually means that the possibilities of new intellectual articulations provided by this programme quite often remain at bay.

Nevertheless the eight years that separate us from Burge's statement mean deep changes in the attitude towards ICT and distance learning. The balkanisation of distance learning has been overcome in recent years namely when conventional universities created task forces and/or departments in order to insert them in their own political and pedagogic strategies. Besides the experiences developed by the Open Universities, the results these institutions have achieved, and its interaction with new segments of the population, have shown this isn't just a weird way of teaching the elder and/or illiterate. As you may see I'm pretty sure that these two vectors, distance learning and ICT, go hand in hand as trends in the development of our cultural paradigm; a paradigm made of instability, mobility, flexibility, and revision; a paradigm where the individual stands at the centre. And all these elements have to be incorporated in teaching and education.

We must bear in mind, as Schramm has stressed, that there's no overall solution for the application of ICT on the educational system: each case has its own specificity requiring a specific answer, a single focused strategy (Schramm, 1977: 263). And this leads us to the crucial issue: where should we stand in terms of pedagogical strategy? I think the concept lies on what has been recently known as blended learning. It's currently acknowledged that our realities demand the incorporation of two or more methods of teaching designed to complement and enhance one another, either blending classroom with on-line teaching, or blending on-line teaching with access to tutorial; either blending multimedia environment with lecturing, or blending paper based assignments with self-study kits, and so on as far as your imagination and the student profiles and demands may take you.

Teaching institutions have to be aware of the fact that they can't restrict themselves to the systematic, year after year, reproduction of the same old syllabus, even when this is supported by e-Learning. Instead they have to design learning environments that will respond to the students needs. And this means that the student profile has to be at the centre of the whole teaching design. Let's not forget that even in a very restrict microcosm we may find several profiles. The syllabus must be conceived in terms of focusing each and everyone of these profiles. Besides the legislation has to be flexible enough in order to incorporate flexibility in terms of the interaction between syllabus and accreditation.

At this level Bologna and the European Credit Transfer System already mean a touchstone since they may provide a pragmatic interaction among university students all over Europe. And as the Socrates experience has shown the syllabus must not be conceived only at a national level. I remember when some thirteen years ago one or two of my students first went to universities abroad. I remember the problems concerning the differences of syllabus and accreditation. It's easy now to visualize a few years ahead, a classroom with students from several European countries that have previously connected among themselves by distance learning. It's even easier now to visualize students in a transnational distance learning programme – Universidade Aberta is actually creating now a programme on Mediterranean Studies with French and Italian universities. So this is not a utopian narrative about something somewhere in the new future, but a reality, our reality, now and here. With this new experience, new demands emerge, namely the need of transnational evaluation (Veiga Simão *et al*, 2002: 357), and, of course, of a diploma supplement provided by the institutions involved (as you know there are also technical implications at this level). But we must bear in mind that this also requires a transnational evaluation of these institutions, which means a body formed by distant teaching universities, institutions of higher education, experts, and government representatives, operating at the specific level of distant teaching evaluation.

When we pronounce the word student, we may connect it with the image of a young boy or a young girl. If we do so, we keep on missing the main point, since our reality demands a constant renewal of our previous knowledge. Instead the word learner may signify the new status of someone who sees the acquisition of knowledge as a life long path. This also means that we have to conceive our mind not as an archive, where some earlier foundations keep on providing information and knowledge throughout our lives. Instead we must conceive our mind as a palimpsest, a place where previous information and knowledge is changed, as a place where an ongoing process of assimilation and reformulation takes place.

Life long learning is actually the key concept for the way we have to deal with several aspects of our daily life, either in our jobs or in those routines that keep on being changed by the impact of ICT. This also demands institutional interaction among universities, industry, professional groups, ethnic minorities; an interaction that has to overcome many prejudices, but which is inevitable; the sooner we overcome them, the better for all the social agents involved, the better for our societies. And we must not forget that in terms of life long learning the process of accreditation can't any longer be restricted to the universities, instead it has to embrace professional organizations (Veiga Simão *et al*, 2002: 285).

All this implies a change of attitudes. Since these new directions, following the liberal and democratic tradition, have stressed the focus on the individual, they presuppose engaged learning, and demand responsibility as student/learner and as citizen. This focus on the individual doesn't forget a social dimension, it actually emphasises this social dimension, namely when we consider ICT and distance learning as "opening instruments to national and cultural alterities" (Tavares, 2002: 3) thus enhancing "the birth of a new concept of citizenship." (*Ibidem*, 4). I mentioned the so-called "*media* conspiracy of silence." Even at this level ICT provides new interactions with our cultural memories, interactions that can and should be built on the frame of different even opposite points of view, thus enhancing debate and plural democratic culture.

I may conclude by stating that while teaching pedagogical and political aspects these are mainly epistemological issues. Why? Because they mean a new attitude towards knowledge; a democratic attitude anchored on a humanist paradigm of instability, mobility, flexibility, and

revision; a paradigm where the individual, no matter what age, social status, gender, race, stands at the centre; a paradigm where ICT and literacy are not remotely related concepts; a paradigm where distance learning, assuming different perspectives, will be part of our daily lives, since the day we first get in touch with a personal computer till the day we die; where blended learning will be a frame for methodological strategies responding to pedagogical profile diversity, and their own social and cultural demands. While focusing on responsibility this paradigm will eventually enhance knowledge, self-reliance, and freedom.

Works Quoted

Barata, Maria do Rosário Themudo, "A Noção de Crise e a sua Aplicação em História Moderna," *in* Sérgio Campos Matos, *Crises em Portugal nos Séculos XIX e XX* (Lisboa: Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa, 2002), pp. 11-24.

Burge, L. "Electronic highway or weaving loom? Thinking about conferencing technologies for learning" in F. Lockwood ed. *Open and Distance Learning Today* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 151-163.

Holmberg, Börje, *Distance Education in Essence – An overview of theory and practice in the early twenty-first century* (Oldenburg: Universität Oldenburg, 2002).

Lynce, Pedro, "Prefácio" *in* José Veiga Simão *et al*, *Ensino Superior: Uma Visão para a Próxima Década* (Lisboa: Gradiva, 2002), pp. 11-20.

Peters, Otto. *Distance Education in Transition – News Trends and Challenges* (Oldenburg: Universität Oldenburg, 2002).

Schramm, W. *Big media, little media* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977).

Sernadas, Ana Mafalda, *Ray Bradbury- Utopias e distopias* (Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, 2002).

Tavares, Maria José Ferro, *Um novo paradigma para o ensino a distância* (Lisboa: Universidade Aberta: 2002).

Veiga Simão, José *et al*, *Ensino Superior: Uma Visão para a Próxima Década* (Lisboa: Gradiva, 2002).