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## **CROSSROADS AND CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCH INTO A MASSIVE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM: UBA XXI**

*Patricia Inés Gándara de Marshall, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina*

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### **Global Positioning System (GPS): Providing location and legacy for open and distance learning**

The GPS will allow the understanding of open and distance learning in Argentina. I selected three dimensions to provide location and summarize the legacy in this field. The first dimension refers to the high interest of our academic teachers for innovation, improvement of their practices and development of new dispositives for the students learning. In Argentina we have over twenty eight years offering distance learning in higher education, having trained human resources along those years and with interaction between us through the distance along the country. The second dimension consists in the network that we generated around all the open and distance programs developed in Argentina for public universities. On 1990 took place the first gathering in the city of Buenos Aires with the participation of representatives of the national universities from the provinces of: Buenos Aires, Salta, Santa Fe, San Juan, Chubut, the city of Buenos Aires and the technological university (UTN). As a result of that reunion came to life “RUEDA”, the university network for distance education in Argentina. The acronym is formed from the initials of the components (Red Universitaria de Educación a Distancia de Argentina) and generates in Spanish language the word “Rueda” which in English means wheel. “RUEDA” gives the spirit of movement and the beginning of the collaborative work still alive through the years. The third dimension to consider is the high interest of the academic community to be in contact with international prominent professors and experience international programs around the world.

### **General characteristics of the open and distance learning program UBA XXI**

The general characteristics of the distance learning program UBA XXI encompass the opportunity to develop and create an open access for more students that could access the university level and start studies at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA). Located in the city of Buenos Aires this university was created in 1821 being public and completely free (The postgraduate courses only requires a tuition free). Four of the Argentines Nobel Laureates were students of this university in different disciplines. The UBA has thirteen faculties offering seventy eight higher careers and four hundred of postgraduate courses. Data from the

last census (2011) totalizes 262,932 students and 67,445 which are doing their first studies at the university.

UBA XXI was developed in 1985 in a historical moment with the beginning of democracy in Argentina after years of *de facto* governments. The program was designed and created by Professors Edith Litwin and Alicia Camilioni as an alternative for the students to complete the common core cycle to join the UBA in a distance and open learning program. Currently, UBA XXI has over twenty eight years of existence. The students may choose the option to participate in this open and distance learning program instead of a regular class “face to face”. By doing the program some of the students anticipate their entrance to the university while they are studying in high school. Some students select the program while they are working and others because they live away from the city, in other provinces.

The program is structured in two semesters and the students select the academic subjects for each period. The extension of each subject could be four months and recently we had incorporated some intensive summer courses with an extension of six continuous weeks during the months of February and March. Since its beginning UBA XXI program has shown a characteristically steady growth on both the number of students, who are interested in the proposal for distance learning, and academic subjects offered in the program.

Some highlights of the programme’s growth were online registration in 2005 and the access to a virtual training campus in 2009. Comparing some data from the first initial student enrolment in the program in March 1986 of 3,304 students to March 2013 of 27,828 students, it results a growth rate of 842%.

An additional side of growth in terms of enrolment has been seen recently with the opening of the intensive summer option courses which generated an enrolment growth of 419% between years 2012 and 2013.

The pedagogical design of UBA XXI includes: specially written material for the distance learning program published by its own editorial (Eudeba), options of tutorial “face to face classes” at different campuses of the university spread in the city of Buenos Aires (92 options of tutorials), a virtual campus with access to forums, chat, videos, guides with general orientation, auto tests, reading guidance, study guides, radio programs for each subject broadcasted by “Radio UBA” and YouTube channel, access to social UBA XXI networks Facebook and Twitter. We must also consider the human resources involved in the daily task of the program: teaching coordinators, educators, pedagogic area, the media and communication areas which produce teaching resources and the design of radio programs, the management of virtual platform, twenty three learning centres geographically distributed in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Tierra del Fuego and Entre Ríos, the administrative management of the modality, the support of students, and the human resources area. All this issues supported by a team of 150 professionals, tutors, administrative and technical staff. The assessments of the students are the only personal attendance chore. They take place in different venues in Buenos Aires city and in the learning centres among the country. Our last

enrolment process 2014 showed for the first semester 30,431 students, and for the second one 26,194, totalizing 56,525 students in the program during for the year 2014. About 30% are foreign students most of them from Brazil, Colombia, Perú, Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, Venezuela and some few from the European continent.

## **Conditions for research into a massive university program of distance and open learning**

Crossroads and challenges for research into a massive university program generate some questions: What is the place for research in a program of such features? How is displayed the role of the researcher in such circumstances? Litwin defined technologies as means for enhancing understanding so then we could imagine research into massive university distance learning as an engine for inclusion, allowing a pluralistic thinking, leading to the creation of research communities that achieve a process of progressive improvement of distance learning and even we may go a step further. Go that step further carries risks, uncertainties and requires a high degree of creativity. Research within the UBA XXI Program has been present since the foundation times as an area dedicated to search the best practices and interventions, a place to share with other teachers, promote distance education, explore new technologies, analysis of the perceptions of students and teachers, observe classroom practices of mentoring and reviewing the different pedagogical instances.

Actually the research area seeks the support of teaching, analyzing practices and innovation. Some of the questions we face: how to create the conditions for research to be linked to educational practices? How is the relationship between research and teaching practices? There are certain research models that facilitate these conditions by creating bridges that are built when students, teachers, and administrators meet together.

## **Reflection on research tensions and crossroads**

The research into a distance learning program presents some tensions in the practice when it seeks to bridge the gap making the distance closer giving visibility of the students. At the same time we are part of the distance learning team and we are sharing with other colleagues the program. A summary vision about research in education when technology is included may be expressed as: “we are using technologies that are constantly changing, the metaphor in the research is like to go chasing the horse on a race and we are trying to ride the horse galloping all the time” (Litwin in Pérez & Imperatore, 2005). The research in distance learning is accompanying technological changes so one of the first tensions might be considered as: **the promptly inclusion of new technologies in the distance learning programs.**

The second tension refers to the time required for a research design and the management of time inside a learning program as the later responds to academic calendars with carefully precise times. The research process requires certain timing that in many occasions is not

supported by the timing of educational proposals: **the different logic of managing of time in a research and an educational process could be considered another tension.**

A possible third tension includes the necessity of **differentiation between research and pedagogical improving practices**, assuming that when the intention is to understand or explain what happens in a process, in a situation, in a social practice then we are in a perspective of research. Now if as teachers, we want our students could learn without difficulty, we may establish that we intend to improve the conditions of teaching and learning, but this is not research. It is improving practices. Research can come to understand for example why the student appropriates what he learns and how he appropriates, and when he appropriates, why he rejects to learn or why he is not interested, but it is not necessarily the intention to improve relations between teachers and students. We would be then, therefore, in a perspective of research (Ardoino, 1997).

We may consider as the forth tension for research in a distance learning program **the articulation of the concepts of “proximity and distance”**. We may consider both concepts as dimensions to be studied, not as opposites, but as a current tension present for research in distance learning. The distance learning dispositive in a massive university program is characterized by the virtual interaction between students and teachers, through chats, forums or videos conferences. As the number of students increases through the years in the program the virtual asynchronous environments are privileged instead of direct contact in the distance learning dispositive. Research in distance learning seeks to establish proximity to understand the situational conditions of distance learning, requires direct contact as we interview students and teachers in a face to face situation, as a get-together for possible study. On certain occasions this proximity could be bridged by technology.

One last tension I would like to mention consists about **the role of the researcher when he is a member part of the distance learning program**. The role of researcher leads us to transit on uncertainty roads that bring us to that crossroads venue. Much more than two paths may be crossing and the dilemma is which one might be chosen. Moreover there is an extra tension when the role of researcher is carried out at the same time being a member of the distance education program. How to separate the roles if the researcher is at the same time a member responsible of the program? As Henry Bergson mentioned, how difficult is to separate one from the other, it would be like pausing the song in an effort to hear clearly the melody, if then it disappears (Minuchin & Fishman, 1984).

## **Impact and validations within the colleagues**

The impact and validations within the colleagues are always a social commitment when researching. These questions: What is being investigated? For what reason? For whom? How we research? Which areas are priority to be studied: policies and strategies, focused on teaching and learning or the use of technology? Are the ones that make sense in a discovery context that refers to the socio-politic, institutional and academics factors? Developments should emerge in consensus with social movements, not only researchers must understand

desktop, the research design decisions should be shared with stakeholders and knowledge should be a frame that links scientific knowledge with the everyday (Sirvent, 2003). We find, then ourselves as professionals, not only in the quest to generate more knowledge, but also trying to achieve a more just and equal society. Within the UBA XXI program we have been setting a research model willing to listen and share with students and teachers. Aimed at disseminating and generate mutual interest with teachers and tutors. It is still building open and collaborative bridges inside the program. We believe that the emphasis should be on the dialogue nature, involving teachers and educators, with openness to their needs and proposals, whereas if it is judged if their impact is understood, can be implemented. The researcher seeks to promote research questions for teachers and educators on the way to challenge their practices. We are trying to answer those questions arising from practice in dialogue with teachers, working with real-life problems, seeking alternatives to solve everyday problems where praxis demands immediate decisions or at least in the shortest time possible.

Some possible validations to be considered:

- Create conditions for establishing complicity and solidarity in the pursuit of knowledge and thus make the other feel that minimum shake that is generated in the research process.
- Inquiry about the determination of the agenda for research into a massive distance learning program.
- Generate fusion of horizons, create new meanings, and search the formation of interdisciplinary teams.
- Select designs with more empirically based studies.
- Participate in the creation of research repositories as a database into research in distance learning shared with other institutions and agencies.
- Build the identity of action research in a new virtual environment.

*“There is an age in which we teach what is known, but immediately comes another age in which we teach what is unknown: it is called research ...”*  
(Barthes, 2003)

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