

# THREE DIMENSIONS OF PERSISTENCE IN DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION – THE MAIN ACTORS: MEXICAN NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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## Abstract

The objective of this paper is to propose a systemic model for the persistence of non-traditional students in Distance Higher Education. The phenomenon of persistence has often been declared a complex problem; despite this recognition, the dimensions that constitute it are absent in academic discussion. From this perspective, the proposed model is made up of the dynamic conditions in which this type of student performs, the preferences in relation to the decisions that bring them closer to their expectations and the highly changing diverse environments in which they are involved.

### Introduction

Distance Higher Education in the world reveals low rates of persistence (Inkelaar & Simpson, 2015). According to Rovai (2003), "Persistence, that is, the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles, is an important measure of higher education program effectiveness". The persistence or drop-out in distance higher education has repeatedly been declared a complex phenomenon (Cendeja-Navarro, 2014; Zhang, 2010). The imbricated environments of the work, school and family of non-traditional students alters the learning dynamics.

The understanding of the persistence of this kind of students has been analysed through models such as those formulated by Tinto (1979), Bean and Metzner (1985), Rovai (2003), Park and Choi (2009). However, from a systemic perspective, the models have omitted the dynamic dimension resulting mainly from changes in expectations, acquired knowledge and the changing of the environments in which non-traditional learners perform. For these reasons, the aim of this article is to propose a systemic model of persistence, in order to understand the continuous change in the realities of students who at the same time work, have family responsibilities and study.

## Non-traditional students

Those who study in non-classroom educational modalities are usually non-traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This kind of students mostly works, has children, maintains a relationship and their age exceeds twenty-four years. Since the advent of virtualization, they do not attend the traditional school (Rovai, 2003). In the Mexican context, this phenomenon is

further upset because we consider that this type of students, in addition to being nontraditional, are also heterogeneous as in other parts of the world due to their multiculturalism (Stoessel et al., 2014), unequal (Solís, 2013) and disconnected (García, 2004; p.28) in the sense that they hide their indigenous origins as a tactic against discrimination.

## Approaches of persistence / dropout

### Psychological models

Psychological approaches analyse the personality traits of students who complete their studies with respect to those who do not. The approach of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) is pioneer in this field. The authors establish that attitudes and beliefs have a significant influence on the behaviour of students (Hart, 2012) and on their cognitive processes (Simpson, 2015; Rurato & Gouveia, 2014); that is, the decision about to study or leave the school is correlated with the individual's previous behaviours, their attitudes, subjective norms and their achievements, which translate into behavioural intentions to persist during their university life (Rurato & Gouveia, 2014).

### Sociological models

The external factors have become the main attractors of analysis from the sociological perspective. The Spady's model (1970) analyses the dropout. This model is based on the Theory of Suicide developed by Durkheim, who argues that suicide is the result of the lack of social integration individual with the social system and its inability to insert itself into the system. The break is presented by a low moral conscience and insufficient social affiliation.

Spady argues that there is a high probability of dropping out of school, when the various sources of influence go in a negative direction, resulting an unsatisfactory academic performance, low level of social integration, dissatisfaction and institutional commitment. On the contrary, if the effects go in a positive direction and are consistent with the initial situation, the student achieves an academic and social development consistent with both their own expectations and with the institutional ones, which significantly favours their retention in the university.

### Organizational models

University institutions, constituted as organizational systems, design and implement services to improve student performance and consequently the persistence of students (Rovai & Downey, 2010). They focus their interest on improving the quality of teaching, the digital educational resources, and the students' experiences in virtual spaces. Scholarship, degree and institutional image financing policies are factors that influence school success. To these efforts, are added the services regarding bibliographic resources, number of students per teacher are added to those efforts. In this sense, they also promote social presence as an operation to maintain permanent contact with students (Sung & Mayer, 2012).

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### Interactionist model

Tinto's model (1986,1987,1975,1975,1997) is the pioneer of interactionist vision in order to understand the scholar retention. The model considers several variables or factors that contribute to reinforce their adaptation to the institution he or she has selected. Family background, such as the family's socioeconomic and cultural level and the values are characteristics that influence the persistence. In addition to this, the personal attributes for interaction (Sung & Mayer, 2012) and self-regulation are important to strengthen academic experience (Sitzmann, 2012).

In the context of Distance Higher Education and from an interactionist perspective, Rovai (2003) and Bean and Metzner (1985) proposed a persistence model (see Figure 1). Bean and Metzner (1985) contributed to the characterization of distance students as non-traditional. The Tinto's model incorporated the concepts of "Before and after entering university". At the same time, it suggests adding digital literacy as detonating parts of persistence/abandonment in distance education, among other components.

However, the aforementioned models have obviated or dealt tangentially the highly changing dynamics which non-traditional, heterogeneous, unequal and disconnected students face, as the ones in Mexico. For this reason, we propose a systemic model of school persistence, to approach the understanding of the persistence to those who are surrounded by highly changing environments.



Figure 1. A composite persistence model (Rovai, 2003)

## A systemic model of school persistence

From a systemic perspective and considering the Parsimony principle, the proposed persistence model is made up of three interrelated dimensions. The expectations, the acquired knowledge and the environments constitute the model. The interaction of these three components generates a dynamic condition that disturbs the scholar path, where the alteration of one of the parts modifies the others (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. A systemic model of scholar persistence

### Knowledge

According to Nonaka et al. (2000), the individual acquires knowledge through a continuous process of learning. The process is a spiral that transits from the most elementary situation to transcendence. It covers the individual and the collective. Its conceptual bases are tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. The stages through which it transits are socialization, externalization, combination and internalization. Knowledge takes meaning in the different environments where students interact. We consider this approach particularly because in general non-traditional students have an active participation in different atmospheres of everyday life.

## Expectations

Expectations correspond to the hope of achieving an attainment. They can be classified as short, medium or long term. The student has aspirations, of course, from before entering school, even when he is doing his studies he builds tacitly or explicitly an idealized design of his future after finishing his studies. The knowledge acquired or that which the student is unable to acquire alters any of his or her stated expectations. The acquisition or non-assimilation of knowledge continuously has a direct impact on the decisions that students make during their school career, both to positively and negatively transform their expectations.

### Transactional Environments

The appearance of non-traditional students is the result two factors: the increase of social demand of higher education and the rapid massification of higher education systems (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002); these characteristics demonstrate that full-time students are not anymore, the main target of educative systems and the patterns are changing in relation to marketization of universities, occupational structures, rising workers and professionals qualifications, family diversification, gender roles, etc.

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In this sense, the non-traditional students have been forgotten from pedagogical studies because of the complexity of their context: adults who enter or re-enter in universities "with a prior major break in their formal involvement in learning" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000; p.314), large range of age, enough experiences in life and commitments, and labour and personal expectations for upgrading.

It is important to understand the inter-role that students play to identify the approach context of non-traditional students. Markle (2015; p.4) found a double conflict between family-school and work-school. However, there is a personal and subjective conflict for the student, who has to twine the multiple expectations from familiar, social, labour, and intrapersonal microsystems.

### **Contextual environment**

The influence of hegemonic forces on social, economic and productive policies must be analysed holistically as substantive parts of the design of educational policies and programs. Otherwise, we will continue to replicate actions that have not improved persistence. The pauperization of work, low salaries, the digital divide and the low quality of life of citizens are the challenges faced by distance higher education in Mexico.

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