

## Short Learning Programmes (SLP) for Professional Development: results from an international collaborative experience (UAb-UNESP)

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### Abstract

In this paper we intend to describe and reflect on the process and results concerning the collaborative work between Universidade Aberta (UAb, Portugal) and Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP, Brasil) for structuring and implementing a SLP for the professional development of higher education librarians.

The course structure involved teachers of the two mentioned institutions, looking for covering current and mandatory subjects needed for the 21st century information professional, who must be aware of the developments related to the access and dissemination of scientific knowledge. The main topics covered were: Open educational resources; Open Science; Information ethics; Skills in the use of technologies applied to online and distance teaching and learning environments.

Taking advantage of online and digital education, and based on UAb's Virtual Pedagogical Model, we were able to put in contact the librarians from the different campuses of the libraries of UNESP, in a context of interaction and collaboration that allowed participants to acquire mutual knowledge of the practices within the same institution. In fact, the challenges posed by continuing professional development, require that these programmes have a close relationship with real work contexts.

During the development of the course it was also possible for each participant to build a personal portfolio and a proposal of practical application of the themes and contents that were being discussed applying a problem-based learning methodology. The design of the course, based on collaboration and interaction, allowed therefore the building of a virtual learning and practice community. Digital environments where the course took place ended up serving two functions and presented a double challenge: on the one hand served as a collaborative workspace between participants, but also allowed the development of their competences to act in that same digital context.

**Keywords:** SLP, e-learning, international cooperation, professional development, information science, UAb, UNESP

## 1. Introduction

The digital contexts in which information professionals operate require skills that enable them not only to respond to the challenges of the knowledge society, but also to the needs of increasingly demanding information service users. In this context, the role of university libraries is not only to provide access to quality information, but to enable the user community to use information optimally for knowledge building, quality research and impact science production.

The development of training activities for the university community, particularly undergraduate and postgraduate students, on the use of information resources available in the library, standardization of scientific work and searching databases, usually on demand, is part of the librarians' routine. However, in the scenario of major transformations and innovation in teaching and student profile, the librarian has his/her role expanded, requiring him/her to prepare courses on different platforms, addressing content that enables the search, use of information to autonomously build knowledge of students, anticipating the difficulties and requests arising from the adoption of a more active and collaborative teaching.

In addition, teachers themselves also need to deal with increasingly sophisticated tools for searching, storing, disseminating and publishing research, including ethical, copyright, and metric issues for evaluating sources and channels for publication, not to mention preparation of learning objects. Thus, once again, there is an important area for librarians to prepare teaching materials and conduct courses in different modalities to meet and anticipate the needs of the university community.

Training processes should therefore respond to these requirements, but in the case of active professionals, the need for flexible training environments is a requirement. At the same time, the sharing of knowledge and good practice should be encouraged to enrich the institutions involved.

So, we had to take into account that we were dealing with mature students that differ from other student profiles in terms of responsibilities in their daily lives, motivations and expectations. All this aspects influences their learning experience (Cercone, 2008; Gravani, 2015), so there is a need for an educational environment where they can determine their own learning pathways, share their ideas and sustain their educational process simultaneously with their private and professional life. Thus, the online distance education environment offers them the right opportunities and means.

In this context, a Short Learning Program (SLP) on Information Science was developed for 20 active librarians, belonging to the various campuses of Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP), using the e-learning modality and according to the guidelines of the Virtual Pedagogical Model of Universidade Aberta of Portugal (UAb). The UAb applies its own pedagogical model, certified by prestigious international organizations in the area. This model is based on four fundamental pillars: student-centered learning, the primacy of flexibility, the primacy of interaction, and the principle of digital inclusion (Pereira et al., 2007, p. 10). This model has been framing the design of the UAb courses, giving conceptual and functional support to new training, while taking into account the changes taking place in the field of higher education and, in particular, distance education (Quintas-Mendes et al., 2018).

## 2. SLP: international cooperation for professional development

In recent years, UAb has made a considerable effort regarding the development of more flexible modes of learning provision. This effort materializes through the design of courses with different durations, focused on specific learning needs identified in society. In the context of continuing education, these SLP take also into account the notion of situated pedagogy, i.e., they have a strong connection with real-world situations and with professional and social contexts, creating links to existing experiences and aiming at an active intervention by students/participants.

We know that adult learners who are self-directed and highly motivated, bring a wealth of life and experience to the learning environment, and look to use current knowledge from courses immediately in their work environments. So, in the context of continuing education we are also talking about "expansive" learning environments (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005), where the participants find close collaborative work, colleagues mutually supportive in enhancing learning and in some circumstances the opportunity to consolidate a professional identity. It is now recognized that these elements are also critical in a successful online learning experience. They are key elements to motivation and satisfaction, and a possible link to course completion and attainment of stated learning outcomes.

Concerning the challenges posed by continuing professional learning, SLP require a close relationship with society and different kind of organizations, to build a "just in time" and "just enough" learning roadmap for trainees. It is important that courses designed to improve professionals' practice establishes congruent relations with workplace settings. The proposals of Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2005) for teacher training can be also applied to the context of librarians continuing professional development. The authors conceptualised learning as both individual and contextual, and mentioned that off-site courses can be valuable in enabling contact and collaboration with others in related but different working situations.

UAb and UNESP have a long academic relationship but this SLP was the first experience in building a joint formative offer. The option for a SLP arose because, in general, formal degrees are more difficult to build together since different national regulations can put unexpected barriers to those kind of programmes. SLP are more flexible concerning time schedule and curricular design. In this sense, they present a wide range of possibilities namely for building programmes in partnership.

According to the report of a survey on good practices in SLP in Europe (Maina, Guardia & Albert, 2018), one of the outstanding trends in SLP is collaboration between more than one institution, including in different countries, as is the experience reported here in which UAb and UNESP jointly developed the proposed training for librarians.

### **3. The case of a SLP on Information Science**

#### **3.1 Context**

UNESP is a public university, maintained by the Government of the State of São Paulo (Brazil) and has the characteristic of being multicampi distributed in 24 cities located in different regions of the state, including the capital and interior. It offers 136 undergraduate courses and 149 postgraduate programs in different areas of knowledge. Since 2017, UNESP, with a network of 33 libraries, has sought to innovate its structure and practices, with a view to changing student profiles and the intense use of technologies, as well as seeking to improve the quality of teaching.

In its Management Plan for 2017-2021, the current rector proposes to "Revitalize and reconceptualize the library space according to contemporary trends, turning it into a learning and living center, including support for the development of practices, teaching, pedagogical and / or technological innovations." (Valentini & Nobre, 2016, p. 15)

It is important to emphasize that libraries should be actively integrated into the activities offered by university courses, in particular those based on active learning methodologies. Thus, librarians need to improve their training in relation to pedagogical aspects.

### 3.2 Objectives and curriculum plan

Given the specific context and needs identified, the course objectives were oriented to the fact that the university library should play an innovative role and be constantly aware of the evolution brought about by technologies. These issues imply developing in students (in this case UNESP librarians) skills that allow them to act appropriately in digital contexts, namely in the field of information literacy and the ethical use of information.

The course aimed to enable librarians to plan and implement training activities for the university community in line with the current technology-intensive students' profile. It was intended to reflect on ways to increase student autonomy as well as how to develop collaborative work with teachers to more broadly meet the needs of the various users.

The course design involved teachers from both institutions, UAb and UNESP, seeking to cover current and necessary themes for the 21st century information professional, looking at the developments related to the access and dissemination of scientific knowledge. Key topics covered were Open Educational Resources, Open science, Information ethics, Competences in the use of technologies applied to the situation of distance education and learning.

The course proposal is in line with the Society of College, National and University Libraries (2017) *Mapping the Future* document, which considers five key strategic lines of library contribution: the use of big data and digital artifacts in research; flexibility and application of technologies in the teaching-learning process; focus on offering services rather than collections; lower boundaries between professionals and greater mutual collaboration; meeting new political, social and economic demands for higher education. On the other hand, the American Library Association (ALA) established in 2008 the standards for trainers that set which knowledge and skills librarians should develop, related to the teaching and learning process, which is not foreseen in the curricula of Brazilian library courses (Mata et al., 2016).

Bearing in mind that the participants in the course were active working professionals, the course was designed to deepen the aforementioned themes in view of the challenges of today's society and in a contextualized reflection paradigm about the profession. These aspects are particularly valued in the context of the continuing education of the group of information professionals, as it is commonly recognized the urgency of professional updating in an area such as Information Science, bearing in mind the rapid changes that have been taking place. In addition, the offering of the distance learning course provided the in service training of librarians and allowed them to experience the use of appropriate tools for hybrid and distance learning, according to the current educational trends.

This course was designed to instruct the librarians on how to perform their educational function in an optimized and efficient manner, in line with the educational trends that are present in current higher education and that have been adopted by UNESP. The knowledge of techniques and strategies of active learning methodologies by librarians contributes to the potential of these processes, both for students and teachers, as well as situations of joint work of teachers and librarians in the educational field.

### 3.3 Course methodologies

Regarding the methodologies developed, it was intended to make full use of the potential of e-learning. The "virtual classroom" allowed us to bring in contact professionals from different UNESP library campuses, in a context of interaction and collaboration that allowed participants to have a mutual knowledge of practices within the same institution, an aspect that was somewhat dissipated, as can be seen in their initial comments. This dimension was valued both during the training, in the forum discussions, and in the final reflection made by the participants and which will be analyzed in the results chapter.

In fact, it was sought that the virtual learning environment (which took place at LMS Moodle) and which is the preferred means of work for the establishment of teacher-student(s) and student-student relationships(s), would facilitate the study and discussion of contents, stimulate reflective autonomy and collaborative participation, both of which are fundamental pedagogical dimensions for today's distance education (Anderson & Dron, 2011). The work strategies most used in the course, such as forum discussion and group tasks (using wiki, blog and other tools), favor individual and joint reflection, leading to the desired participatory construction of knowledge, which helps to consolidate the learning community.

The course developed was also based on the construction of a personal portfolio and on proposals for the practical application of the themes and contents that were being debated, in a problem-based learning methodology approach. Participants were invited to analyze and identify contexts that need intervention in their areas of expertise and to look for ways to respond to these needs.

#### **4. Results discussion**

This study took a qualitative and an interpretive approach "attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The complexity of the students' personal experiences offers interesting insights concerning the role of SLP in professional development and the value of online distance learning in that context.

The data were collected from a final written document where participants were invited to comment about the proposed contents and activities, the skills and knowledge acquired and the virtual environment in which the SLP was implemented. We illustrate the most relevant topics with examples of participant comments, which help us to better understand the scope and impact of this training.

##### *Course contents and activities*

The course content most commonly referred to by participants as being unfamiliar to them or about which they had not much knowledge, focused on Open Educational Resources and Creative Commons licenses. The various comments analyzed make it clear that participants greatly appreciated the fact that they had given access to diverse information about these Resources and that this new knowledge would be very useful to them in their professional daily activity.

*The OERs were a great discovery, I was surprised by the immense availability of this type of material and delighted that I could also produce contents with it. Another very important aspect addressed in this module was about the Creative Commons licenses, which I did not know about and will also integrate into the training I will provide to my students. (MEVP)*

*Open Educational Resources - I didn't know about these resources and learning about the use of licensed materials [Creative Commons] was extremely important along with the topic of information ethics, which is something we always deal with students here. (MF)*

Information ethics, copyright and academic integrity were also identified as interesting topics and considered indispensable for helping to form autonomous users and conscious and responsible citizens.

*We librarians perform many tasks on a daily basis, whether in the field of reference services or technical processing, and this routine experience almost automatically makes us leave a more focused orientation to users on the ethical use of information in the academic environment as we are restricted to quoting / plagiarism issues. This theme made me think of strategies for working with students. (KL)*

The reflections also contained multiple references to the fact that various web 2.0 tools were presented, such as padlet and e-portfolio, which for some were unknown and for others had not yet been exploited to their full potential.

*Although I work, study, use and live in Web 2.0, I confess that I didn't know much of the 2.0 tools presented in the third module and every information I receive adds me a lot as a person and as a professional, both for the development of my activities and - even more - as a "marketing" librarian for information skills development. (MEVP)*

*With regard to prior knowledge and personal empowerment, at the end of this journey I feel better able to develop a virtual environment course using (and challenging my users to use) the most diverse Web 2.0 resources that are openly and democratically available to anyone in order to increase the offer of new services in the library. (CAM)*

#### *Developed competences*

The trainees mentioned various skills that they had the opportunity to develop throughout the course and which they considered to be the most useful for their career path. Among the most cited we find the incentive for creativity and networking.

*The topics covered in the course are fundamental for us to develop the necessary skills to act as mediators between information and the user in order to enable him / her to identify and use the various sources of information and services provided by the Library which are linked to information and communication technologies. (TRV)*

The elaboration of a project of a course on Information Literacy, as well as the possibility of structuring initiatives that promote the development of students' Information Literacy skills were pointed out by several librarians as one of the advantages of this course.

*Developing a tutorial for working on information skills with higher education students has shown that we will take time to create it, but by the end it will always be available for users to consult, ask questions, and be more autonomous, allowing librarians to focus on other tasks. (KL)*

*[The course] strongly contributes to our education and enables us to take actions so that library users are able to identify their needs, search for relevant sources of information, select them, synthesize them, evaluate and apply them. (TRV)*

All education systems, including university libraries, should aim for students to acquire knowledge and skills to understand the world in which they live in order to become adults capable of actively intervening in society. Thus it is justified that one of the priority goals is to develop in students skills to learn how to learn and increase their autonomy. Students should be able to learn in order to mobilize all their personal and intellectual resources to research, analyze, compare, classify, summarize and evaluate information, i.e. building knowledge. In this context, the role and responsibility of the library and university librarians are increasingly valued. These ideas are well summarized in the following comments:

*The ability to learn how to learn must be developed by us and taught to users who come to us so that we all can contribute to the formation and development of conscious and active citizens. (MMO)*

*All the readings and activities proposed in each module, further reinforced the importance of the active role of libraries / librarians in the teaching / learning process, not only as disseminators and facilitators in access to information in any medium (print, digital, audiovisual, etc.) but also as encouraging and educating towards the use of information resources. (VS)*

Participants in the course were unanimous in considering that attendance at this training provided them with a considerable increase in knowledge on the various themes developed and referred in particular to Information Literacy. As an example we present the following comments:

*Participating in this course addressing information literacy has broadened my horizon regarding my own literacy and the responsibility I have as a librarian in the daily development of my library assignments. (MMO)*

*I consider that with the experience gained in the Information Literacy and Innovation course I am able to create a course for the users of my library with higher quality that will better achieve the teaching objectives of Information Literacy raised by my unit and our users. (AF)*

Another evolution felt by the majority of the librarians was the fact that this course allowed the theoretical knowledge that they already had and the one they had now acquired to be put into practice through the activities and challenges that were being suggested throughout the course, as evidenced by this librarian,

*It was very important being able to design an OER, especially having to be careful to use and find content registered with Creative Commons licenses that would allow to use the type of content you were designing. Until then I only knew the theory, doing the practical project raised my knowledge to a higher level. (AF)*

#### *Community building*

Sharing information within the UNESP network, among the 20 librarians, was considered an excellent added value given the opportunity to exchange ideas, experiences and good practices developed in libraries that, although physically distant from each other, belong to the same higher education institution.

*The possibility of developing activities and programs in network, considering that this class is formed by librarians covering almost the whole state of São Paulo was also very enriching. We are physically distant but we can keep close in the development of our libraries, as the focus should be of better assisting students of the UNESP Network, sharing experiences and developing proposals in the network. After all, librarians can and should overcome the traditional routine activities. (MMO)*

*I hope that in the future I will be able to maintain a knowledge network of projects and applications of literacy practices or informational competencies of UNESP libraries as well as sharing the needs and fulfillment of demands of our users, new and traditional student profiles, acting like a community. (LA)*

#### *Online learning and course design*

The format of the course and the fact that it is offered online and at a distance has shown to the librarians the benefits of this kind of training, encouraging them to take a proactive approach to online training, including thinking of designing courses with these characteristics for their own users. Thus, they expressed the need to be more flexible and open to change.

*As I read the suggested texts and performed the proposed activities, I began to see how important it is that we librarians need to be proactive in facing the new training scenarios - online - and the role of the university library with them – that is, to be more flexible and open to change. (MO)*

As a less positive aspect, some trainees referred their own time constraints that did not allow them to follow the topics and the discussion forums and challenges as they would have liked. Some also mentioned that the timeframe provided for each theme was not sufficient for a thorough and careful reading of the suggested texts and the timely and reflected participation in the forums,

*My expectation was that this module [module 1] would go beyond ethics in the Librarian profession, encompassing all aspects of academic integrity, including fake news. We do not have time, during the work, to discuss about this subject and it is extremely relevant for the education of our users. (LR)*

#### *Suggestions for future SLP*

Some aspects for improvement were suggested by the librarians, and these relate, for example, to the temporal distribution of themes and the inclusion of other subjects.

*I would also like to have seen other aspects that would address other pillars of competence such as identifying information needs and especially assessing users' competencies. (LR)*

In conclusion, the balance is undoubtedly positive, with the various participants expressing their satisfaction with the frequency of this training. According to their comments, they have acquired new personal, professional and academic competencies.

*Finally, a formation that made my eyes shine in terms of its form of development, the focus on the autonomy of the individual and the creative interaction developed via virtual / digital means, inspiring me to present / develop proposals for training sessions. (JPAC)*

*I would like to finalize the reflection by sending my deep thanks to the course's teachers and others involved in this partnership between UAb de Portugal and UNESP for the opportunity, the conviviality and all the benefits achieved. (AF)*

## **5. Final remarks**

The design of the analyzed SLP, based on collaboration and interaction, made it possible to build a virtual learning and practice community, as it brought together professionals from the same institution, but geographically dispersed across the various campuses. The digital environments in which the course took place ended up fulfilling two functions and constituting a double challenge, recognized and valued by the participants in the final appreciation of the course: on the one hand they served as collaborative workspaces between the participants, but also allowed to develop their skills to act in this same digital context.

We think that in the context of continuing education it is also important to allow different kind of publics to upgrade their skills and knowledge in new learning formats. Online distance education gives adult students the advantage of lifelong learning due to its flexibility. And flexibility, student centred learning and interaction are three major principles of UAb's Virtual Pedagogical Model.

Strengthening the vision of a learning society and lifelong learning in online contexts also fosters the use of tools that are essential for digital citizenship and also increases professional confidence particularly in

professional settings where digital environments are increasingly taking place (Novo, Bastos and Vasconcelos, 2016). This last aspect was seen as a very important one by this specific group of librarians. Taking into account the concept of Social Presence, defined by Garrison and Anderson (2003) as "the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as 'real' people (p. 28)", this learning context based on conversational settings helped participants to build knowledge, sharing experiences and practices, but has also contributed, in this particular case, to consolidate a professional and institutional identity.

Finally, it is important to mention that the articulation achieved between the two institutions involved in this training project launches good perspectives for future joint work and reveals the potential of SLP in online contexts for building partnerships to develop training that respond to people's concrete needs.

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