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## **Socio-economic and scientific challenges of a qualitative design of distance learning: contextualization and interculturalization**

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### Abstract

Promoted in Europe by the Bologna Process, distance education has increased in recent years. This boom began a major transformation of universities characterized, among others, by a multiplication of exchanges between individuals from different personal, educational and professional backgrounds. However, in this new teaching context, international students and teachers are sometimes destabilized: students in the face of new methods of university work and program content, teachers because they are confronted with diverse student profiles, expectations and needs. The questions raised by the relationship between distance learning and /learners in a FLE/S (French as a Foreign/Second language) perspective are numerous. In the context of this article, we will first consider ODL (Open and Distance Learning) "contextualization"<sup>2</sup>, which will be discussed in connection with the problems a misguided sense of interculturality in the field of ODL poses. Finally, we will identify what we believe to be fundamentally at the root of these problems: an epistemological continuity in research, which is based on the paradigm of "trace", which can only lead to an essentialized congealing of meaning ... or a solid/culturalist approach of the intercultural (Dervin, 2009a).

*Key words:* ODL, qualitative research, contextualization, intercultural, phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, teaching of language-culture

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<sup>2</sup> The authors of this article do not always use italics or quotation marks for the terms "context/ualise/ualisation", even if the object of this paper is to discuss their relevance.

## Socio-economic and scientific challenges of a qualitative design of distance learning: contextualization and interculturalization

Promoted in Europe by the Bologna Process, distance education has increased in recent years. This boom began a major transformation of universities characterized, among others, by a multiplication of exchanges between individuals from different backgrounds. However, in this new teaching context, international students<sup>3</sup> and teachers are sometimes destabilized: students in the face of new methods of university work and program content, teachers because they are confronted with diverse student profiles, expectations and needs. The questions raised by the relationship between distance learning and learners in a FLE/S (French as a Foreign/Second language) perspective are numerous. In this article, we share some thoughts deliberated within the framework of the project entitled *FAire du Distanciel un Atout : Constructions Qualitatives du Formatif Distanciel (FaDA : CQFD)*, (Turning Distance Education into a Benefit: Qualitative Constructions of Distance Education Training, supported by the French Centre Region, scheduled for 3 years (2013-2015) and supported by the University of Tours Dynadiv team (PI: I. Pierozak)<sup>4</sup>. First, we will look at "contextualization"<sup>5</sup> of ODL, which will be discussed in connection with the problems a misguided sense of interculturality in the field of ODL poses. Finally, we will discuss what we believe to be fundamentally at the root of these problems: an epistemological continuity in

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<sup>3</sup> Students studying outside the territory where the lessons are designed, unlike a foreign student who studies in that territory.

<sup>4</sup> This project brings together four partners: EA 4246 Dynadiv, the sociolinguistics and language teaching department of the University of Tours, the AFPP (Association de Formation Professionnelle Polytechnique; Polytechnic Vocational Training Association Polytechnique) in its Open Spaces Knowledge dimension, and the IETF (Institut d'Etudes Françaises de Touraine; French Studies Institut in the Tourain region), totaling a dozen people - researchers and/or professional stakeholders. The ODL programs taken into account here are diverse in terms of national (Tours), regional (Angers-Le Mans-Tours, Reunion) and international (Cape Town) anchors, as well as training provided (in French as a Foreign/Second Language didactics, as well as various basic knowledge, including French, French as a Foreign Language/French as a Second Language).

<sup>5</sup> As noted in the abstract, the authors of this article do not always use italics or quotation marks for the terms "context/ualise/ualisation", even if the object of this paper is to discuss their relevance.

research, which is based on the paradigm of "trace", which can only lead to an essentialized congealing of meaning ... or a solid/culturalist approach of the intercultural. (Dervin, 2009a).

It is therefore in our view less important to go beyond the intercultural, by adding a prefix of time ("post") which can suggest a form of continuity, than to base it on an epistemological perspective (phenomenological hermeneutics) that allows – in research and therefore also in training - to reaffirm all different layers of meaning. The approach used here (described above in the third section) is therefore less focused on concepts/ideas (community, identity, culture, intercultural, etc.), which seem to be “surface” issues, than on a reflection on the epistemological foundation of social science research and ODL in particular. Without this reflection, we feel that the discussion of these concepts/notions cannot proceed.

**Transnationalisation of Universities : More distant learners in ODL.** The Bologna Process "recommends that European countries increase their cooperation in transnational education"<sup>6</sup>. “Teaching is said to be transnational if it uses online or distance training and is given in another country than the one which organizes it" (Charlier *et al.*, 2009, our translation from French). In this context, the export of academic distance, made possible through digital integration has experienced strong growth during the last decade. These new educational forms have created new spaces for intercultural exchange. Indeed, today, globally, there are more and more international students, and this trend continues to grow.

Importing countries of these new courses are most often emerging or developing Asian and African countries which suffer from a lack of on-site staff and can only offer a limited range of courses to a student audience that is constantly growing. Ideally, this new form of education could allow them to diversify their offerings, to train managers locally at a lower cost, to help improve the quality, diversity and relevance of local training, and perhaps even

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<sup>6</sup> 1997 Lisbon Convention (Council of Europe and UNESCO).

prevent the exodus of skills. Thus, the liberalization of ODL required by the WTO could allow development aid championed by the UNESCO at the same time. In this context of "commodification" of higher education, the needs, i.e. the learning pathways for international students, remain however under-researched. As such, most ODL studies about developing countries focus on technology (the vectors that enable the transmission of data) or concern the relationship between the learners and technology (lack of computer literacy among learners, for example). Yet, the relationship between learner and working methods or learner and training content are, however, questions less raised or even completely non-existent except in the guidelines of international organizations, such as UNESCO, OCDE, etc. Looking at their recommendations it seems that the difficulties of international students in higher online education institutions are essentially problems of language/culture skills (Hughes, 2008). These international organisations advocate and/or support initial language training programs for foreign students and ignore the non-linguistic aspects of the teaching/learning processes. However, could the main difficulty encountered by international students today not be some "distance" between the international students and the teaching itself? If this were the case, how can we "adapt" the learning content? How to make it accessible without necessarily suggesting learning the language/culture of instruction, as advocated by international organizations, but by placing the training in an intercultural perspective, that is primarily related to relations? This is one of the questions which is of importance to us within the context of the FADA : CQFD project.

**Problems encountered by international students: a lack of contextualization of the teaching content?** In order to better prepare and support the integration of international students in the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FLE) online course (from the FADA : CQFD project partners : University of Cape Town in South Africa and Université François Rabelais de Tours in France), we conducted interviews with learners and instructors to try to identify their difficulties and their expectations. We also observed whether the teachers take into account diversity of the students in

their lessons and if so, how. Thus, we interviewed six teachers, three tutors and twenty students. The quotes cited in this article are drawn from these interviews, which were done in French and translated by us in English. All interviewed students enrolled in the online teaching of FLE course had finished their high school studies and the first three years of undergraduate studies in their own country; they were, for the first time, confronted with an online university programme.

It seemed that one of the first difficulties that these students seem to encounter concerns the content of the courses; they are not always well received by international students. The students assert that they often refer to French-centered concepts, authors or situations and do not meet their needs: "... *it is very Franco-French!*" replied one of the learners in an interview, even if they enjoy this "journey in learning", "*there are many French references, but it is good*". Students sometimes feel that the content of the courses they are given will not be useful in their professional lives with their (own, future) students: "*How will I use all this in my classes?*" or "*it is not at all practical*". The feeling of the inadequacy of the content with their professional fields can also be felt for some institutional reasons: "*My superiors would not allow me to do so*" (W). If the contents appear to be problematic, the working methods are seen in a similar light. Students are also destabilized when confronted to this new academic "e-culture": "*there is no comparison, in Congo, it was not like that*". These difficulties give rise to a real learning insecurity which students interpret as gaps, language problems or too high a level of training: "*There are many differences: here it is advanced*", "*there are things I do not understand*", "*I think I lack the basics, at the honors level there is research, but I came directly to the Master's program, I lack basic knowledge*".

The authors of articles on e-learning in the 'South' (e.g., Karsenti 2006; Karsenti and Collin 2010) interpret this as a lack of quality of the training, a non-compliance with the requirements of the country – and of the local labor market opportunities - as countries exporting training programs would require learners to adapt to their system rather than the opposite. In short, they ignore the realities of the importing countries. Also, starting from the

premise that the international students' main challenges today could be due to a lack of contextualization of their learning; some online training programmes, which insist on taking into account all learners' profiles, propose to contextualize teaching.

But how best to adapt and contextualize these courses was the first question raised by the FADA project. If intercultural exchange is the key to affiliation and thus the success of these students, how to make the ODL training "intercultural"? Thus, in the course of this study, the question of the links that seem to exist between *contextualization*<sup>7</sup> and *interculturalization* - two contemporary educational concepts - emerged.

**Contextualization and interculturalization: how to find the link?** But before we can take this link into consideration, we must ask which contextualization we are talking about. This will be addressed in three stages. We begin with a comparison of two notional couples mobilized differently according to the context: the partition between *contextualization/universalism* on the one hand (now a classic in the field of Teaching French as a Foreign Language –TFFL), and the relationship between *globalization* and *glocalization*, on the other hand, most commonly used in the economic field. At a time when language and culture teaching is increasingly questioned through an economic prism<sup>8</sup>, this notional confrontation intends to question some mechanisms particularly present in ODL (import/export is facilitated by technology in this area). This then leads us to suggest a cross-cutting difficulty in the teaching/economics fields: that of adaptation mechanisms *a priori* to the intervention contexts, said culturalist, whether educational or economic. Finally, the anti-culturalism of the intercultural perspective requires us to identify some ways of designing contextualization otherwise.

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<sup>7</sup> We do not use italics or quotation marks whenever we use this concept, even if the object of this paper is to discuss its relevance.

<sup>8</sup> B. Maurer's (2011) criticism of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is certainly the latest significant example. The discussion of this well-founded criticism, also conducted by others, does however not concern us here.



***Contextualisation and glocalisation: a heuristic analogy?*** Didactic contextualization is a concept that is opposed (now almost classically) to the various wanderings through methodological universalism against which language and culture teaching, and the teaching of French as a Foreign language in particular, since some time. In this perspective, contextualizing would mean adapting local teaching supply "in the field", as opposed to methodological universalism (sometimes seen as a form of neo-colonialism) which consists of exporting methodologies throughout the world (and methods/textbooks: editorial merchandise is never far away in these diffusionist companies). To take just one example, current and past criticism of universalizing and homogenizing readings of the CEFR stress the need for historical and geographical contextualization of this document today (see e.g. Coste, 2007). The idea of *contextualized teaching* is that thinking about teaching can be global (through teacher and researcher networking) but taking into account local characteristics.

From this point of view, this didactic perspective could be likened to a form of "other-globalization" (Blanchet, 2009) in that it rejects standardization through globalization which also affects learning. A "humanist" didactic contextualization is thus contrary to a "dehumanized" globalization.

However, if one looks at the economic side, one realizes that things are perhaps not so clear-cut. The parallel between the two fields, **economic and teaching**, however, begins with a clear convergence of goals: in the same vein as researchers and educators advocate greater contextualization of methodologies and practices, inventors and proponents of *glocalization* do so in the name of the fight against the standardizing universalism of economic globalization. The concept of glocalization is therefore originally linked to anti- or alter-globalization connotations. But what is interesting, because it introduces ambiguity, is that this concept is also included in the business world as an *economic strategy* to adapt to local markets, in a perspective to adjust the demand/local clientele side. Marketers and managers

quickly realize the flipside of the imposition of management models, modes and consumer products, source of stakeholder resistance, and is, therefore, ultimately, counter-productive. Also, reinvested in a mercantile perspective, glocalization becomes a strategy for overcoming these barriers to market penetration.

It seems that we can make a heuristic analogy<sup>9</sup> here between the business world and the education world: isn't teaching contextualization *also* (especially?) a way of entering "markets", after having observed the inefficiency of methodological universalism? Contextualization could then be read as a strategy of glocalization, imposing certain didactic models (still coming largely from European/Western language and culture teaching) by hybridizing them locally. If we continue the analogy: it allows the highlighting of the similarity of contextual adaptation mechanisms, whether educational<sup>10</sup> or economic, in their difficulty to overcome the pitfalls of culturalism.

**Apriorism and cultural adaptation of e-learning: a trend.** The idea of glocalization has in fact produced a whole movement/current of "intercultural management/marketing", which usually has intercultural as its name while it is largely culturalist (in the sense of homogenization/reification of "cultures"), as clearly shown by F. Dervin (2009b, 2011). However, this problem seems to arise in ODL teaching too, as two quick examples show. An example derived from research first: here are the words of one researcher in educational sciences, specializing in adult learning in an e-learning setting:

"Tomorrow, teaching in networks will become the norm for many: will there therefore be a need to *adapt pedagogies and teaching content to the specificities of each student taking into account the ethnic, linguistic, religious, philosophical, sociological, political specificity*, or will one have to hope that the acculturation phenomenon will "smooth out" the differences between the learners?"

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<sup>9</sup> Understood as a "hermeneutic" comparison, that is to say, a "construction of comparable items" (Ricoeur, 2004: 62) having as an objective only to help us think, and not as a "formal" comparison, term by term, which intends to be objective (this distinction between the two types of comparisons is established by the Belgian comparative researcher Jucquois G., 2000).

<sup>10</sup> We mainly discuss ODL teaching, but these ideas are more widely valid for language and culture teaching.

*Should the trainer, faced with national cultures different from his own, adapt his teachings to "go towards the learners" to adapt to the problem of each of them? Currently this is not the case in classroom training where the trainer is at the center of learning, but what will happen tomorrow? In ODL? Some intercultural reflection seems necessary [...]" (Frayssinhes, 2006 emphasis added; our translation from French).*

The future of ODL is presented here - certainly in an interrogative form, but the questions are largely rhetorical - as passing through a necessary "intercultural reflection", understood as a reflection on the adaptation process of "systems"<sup>11</sup> to "different national cultures" or even to "ethnic, linguistic, religious, philosophical, sociological, political specificities" of each learner.

This "culturalist" approach of "cultural differences" (explicitly inspired by Geert Hofstede's culturalism<sup>12</sup>) has little to do with the intercultural as a hermeneutic process, as conceptualized by Mr. Abdallah Pretceille among others (see also Debono and Goï, 2012)<sup>13</sup>.

After this ODL research example, let us look at a more concrete example of an ODL system also taking this culturalist route in the design of its adaptation/contextualization. The PADEN project ("Preparing non-francophone distance learners in French in a scientific context"), supported by the higher education scientific institutions *TELECOM ParisTech* and *TELECOM & Management SudParis*, "is a distance learning system for non-francophone students already enrolled in a French course in our institutions"<sup>14</sup>. In this project, there are educational systems for Teaching French as a Foreign Language where adaptation is proposed in terms of "learning strategies related to the nationality of the learner" (Rizza et al., 2008). To link "learning strategies" to a "nationality" is in itself a theoretically questionable

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<sup>11</sup> We cannot dwell here on the quotation marks surrounding this term, readable from a classical instrumental point of view. From now on, the term will appear without quotation marks.

<sup>12</sup> See Geert Hofstede's website: [geerthofstede.nl](http://geerthofstede.nl).

<sup>13</sup> This important difference in meaning rightly illustrates rightly what the coordinators of this volume note in their call for papers: "Today, no two definitions of the intercultural seem to match".

<sup>14</sup> Source : [http://savoirspartages.mines-telecom.fr/p\\_fr\\_recherche\\_projets\\_PADEN\\_191.html](http://savoirspartages.mines-telecom.fr/p_fr_recherche_projets_PADEN_191.html)

essentialization. But, beyond that, such culturalist contextualization is also practically counter-productive (even if presented as very *effective* otherwise) in that it produces identity assignments, a homogenization of contexts, "categories" in which learners cannot see themselves.

**ODL systems as drivers of interculturalization? Advantages of an alter-reflexive biographical approach.** The source of this widespread form of culturalism seems to reside in a certain *apriorism* of the ODL contextualization that prevents them from being designed as "intercultural" or rather as "drivers of interculturalization". Rather than seeking to contextualize ODL systems to make them 'intercultural', another solution may lie in the development of systems providing spaces where interculturalization is the work of the systems' stakeholders. An ODL which is not intercultural *a priori*, but *in training*, leaving the possibility of an interculturalization which can only be unpredictable: if it is its goal, interculturalization cannot be the guaranteed outcome of the system.

The biographical approach, already mobilized in some ODL programs, is in this sense a possible teaching method - even if we must add a dose of reflexivity, or "alter-reflexivity" so that it does not run empty somehow (notion proposed by D. Robillard, 2007 and 2008).

In the ODL Master 1 in language teaching/teaching of French as a foreign language proposed by the Universities of Tours, Angers and Le Mans (part of the ODL programs studied in the FaDa project), this biographical approach is present in certain activities. In the course *Apprendre et enseigner une culture étrangère* (Learning and teaching a foreign culture) for example, students are asked to make their *linguistic and cultural portrait* (or that of a third person). At first, this portrait was to be sent to the tutor, who gave feedback on it. For this exercise not to remain confined to the tutor-student relationship, its *modus operandi* has evolved with the choice to have learners' exchanges on the forum, using these mini-life stories. From an exercise evaluated by the tutor, the choice was made to shift to a more alter-

reflexive mode of the biographical approach. So, interculturalisation is not an “*a priori*” given of the system (here ODL), but is *made possible by the educational system*. "Production of interculturalisation" is not achieved through a form of contextualization trying to make training "intercultural" in itself and *a priori*, but left to the responsibility of the stakeholders. This is why - and unlike “naturally” or *a priori* intercultural ODL programs - the result (interculturalisation) can never be guaranteed. Formulated in a different way: the biographical approach, which is very popular in the field of language and culture teaching in the "portfolio" format, is not in itself a panacea or a guarantee of effective intercultural exchange among stakeholders. Without conceiving it as reflexive/alter-reflexive, it can quickly be reduced in principle and misused. In a column written in 2007, Jean-Pascal Rimbaud (trainer at an IUFM<sup>15</sup>) expressed some frustration about the technocratic use of digital portfolios in ODL:

"So the IUFM created an "*e-portfolio software*", where each competence (of a depleted framework, of course) will be evaluated from a computer “deposit” or “submission” by the trainee. The obsession with control will creep up: each IUFM trainer should ask themselves "What kind of evidence do I ask from my students in order to objectively prove a competence?". "What type of trace" is the recurrent word invading the preparation of courses. "The trace! The trace! First the trace! Content - possibly - afterwards". This has to fit effectively in the e-portfolio. To avoid overloading students, the most comprehensive trainers invented the *long written extract* (a copy-past part from the thesis that later no longer shows where it was taken from). For any topic, there has to be a long written extract!

We also use multiple-choice questions (self-correcting through ODL: open and distance education), self-correcting because the trainer does not like to evaluate, it would take precious time he has devoted to the determination of the “type of trace”. Trainers actually spend tens, maybe hundreds of hours a year in front of their computer screen, to evaluate the trace, check the boxes, position the cursor, type comments related to proposals to validate a given trace, as well as reports of visit, again combined with the checking of boxes. [...] "(Rimbaud, 2007: no page, emphasis added).

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<sup>15</sup> An IUFM is a teacher training college (*Institut universitaire de formation des maîtres* in French).

J.-P. Rimbaud's reaction about the technocratic use of portfolios in ODL finds an explanatory echo which is disturbing in the way research on ODL specifically is conducted, where the "corpus paradigm"/"trace paradigm" seems spontaneously present (see details below). Certainly this (with the quantitative considerations potentially arising from it) has some utility. These are also sensitive arguments for the scientific community, or, more trivially for the funders and politicians. However, one can scientifically and didactically consider doing otherwise, even if success is neither as easy nor as guaranteed (see above precise ref to section, please).

**The epistemological angle or how to think about ODL in TFFL** In epistemological terms, what distinguishes research on ODL in language and culture teaching? Two examples will be considered in the section below to provide some answers. The first is about a typical example (see 3.1). In a way, it shows the default approach currently prevailing, which is a (social) constructivist paradigm in which (socio) technical instrumentation organizes the systems which goes hand in hand (thanks to the tracing that is enabled by technical means) with a quantitative design and is configured through contextualization and the intercultural dimension.

The second is an alternative approach, still under development, taking as its starting point the formulated elements of critical reflection. In this regard, we could talk about a phenomenological hermeneutics paradigm (Robillard, 2009) for which the question of technique (and more broadly of the instrument), in its relation to the Human, is otherwise thought (Heidegger, 1973). The alternative is also located at the level of qualitative reflection (Goï, 2012; Tours Qualitatif 2013, forthcoming); this is not without consequences for the concepts mentioned above.

**A default approach.** In the late 90s, research was developed on intercultural exchanges between distant language classes, one very well-known example worldwide being the *Cultura* project between the USA and France<sup>16</sup>. Considering this type of research, at the start of data mining technologies, some researchers now point to the need to work on comprehensive data in order to avoid explicit plurality of interpretations:

"2.1. Multiple interpretations of incomplete data

The latter interpretation [of several what?] raises questions. What is meant by "culture of Internet use?" [...] Could we not rather talk about different institutional cultures? [...] In addition, what about the teacher's intercultural competence? [...]

Many different interpretations are thus made possible by the fact that there is [incomplete data]. Our aim is not to criticize the established experimental protocol [or the fact that there has been transmission of] part of the data to other colleagues. [...]. *The problem is rather that the research is developed on the basis of data that are too fragmented. The scientific discourse that develops from partly decontextualized examples takes on an impressionistic character. The game of cross citations amplifies the phenomenon and directs the reader towards a stereotypical interpretation that could be described as culturally marked (North American vision of differentiated usage of the Internet in their country and in other countries). Here one re-encounters, somehow, on an epistemic level, the fundamental opposition between the science of the exemplum and then science of the datum [...].* » (Chanier, Ciekanski, 2010, emphasis added ; our translation from French).

We should not dwell on the usual reifying uses of the concept of "culture" - including the authors themselves explaining the differences in "institutional cultures" in France and the United States<sup>17</sup> - but instead emphasize that, in view of the "datum", research of all the data (which includes contextualization<sup>18</sup>) therefore aims to reach a "culturally [non] significant"

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<sup>16</sup> See Furstenberg et al. (2001) whose conclusion, by the way, echoes part of the arguments in part 2.

<sup>17</sup> One may wonder if the various uses of "culture" are not more or less necessarily condemned to culturalism, to essentialism, and even the "intercultural", which could allow the location of the cultural dimension in the relational (dynamic and unique), seems to fit into this generalizing and assigning perspective (trend denounced in Dervin, dir, 2013; Dervin, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> The "contextualization" mentioned here is that of the ODL teaching *research data* and not of the *teaching systems and tools*: however, it is the paradigmatic consistency of the two phenomena that this contribution intends - among others - to show.

interpretation. In this context, as commented below, looking for completeness then logically implies work on what the authors call the "corpus paradigm", which can be broken down into four points:

**"Systematic collection of documents related to the object of study. [...]**

**Description of the context.** [...] When the object is a learning situation created by the researchers, as is often the case in ALSIC<sup>19</sup>, then the context includes, in addition, what motivated the experiment, the items related to its development in their technological and pedagogical aspects, their observation, even those related to the research protocol [...]. The context is substantially expanded so that the research can then study the relationship between the induced and the played. *Of course this description, contained in the corpus, is not limited to what can be invoked as context in subsequent analyses.* To this detailed description of the context, metadata in synthetic are added, describing in precise terms the characteristics of the work, its actors (collectors, contributors, etc.). [...].

**Organization and manipulation for treatment. [...]**

**Arrangements for exchange and sharing.** For a scientific approach to proceed with its multiple analytical phases, reanalyses, and contradictory discussions, it is necessary that the authors of the corpus organize it in view of exchange and sharing. [...] Speaking of data *about humans or experiments concerning them*, the corpus will incorporate further elements allowing the evaluation of adherence to ethics (Oates, 2006) during the experimentation phases of collection and pre-treatment (anonymous). [...] (Ibid., emphasis added).

Consequently, "The collection of traces is essential [...] Mulce (MULTimodal contextualized Learner Corpus Exchange)<sup>20</sup> was created to collect complete data of online training and organize them within structures called training corpus or LETEC (LEarning and TEaching Corpus):

*[... Which] assemble in a systematic and structured way a set of data [...] enriched with information [...] allowing their analysis in context.*" (Lawrence Chanier at para. 2012)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Journal entitled *Apprentissage des langues et systèmes d'information et de communication*

<sup>20</sup> For details of the research programme (2007-10): <http://mulce-doc.univ-bpclermont.fr/>. In May 2012, the eight studied online courses mainly share the objective of teaching French as a Foreign language, and half of them have the explicit objective of intercultural competence development.

<sup>21</sup> NB. The training corpora are "global corpora" contextualizing the sub-"distinguishable corpora", only corpora that can be treated by an individual researcher. (<http://mulce-doc.univ-bpclermont.fr/spip.php?article24>)



By way of comment, several remarks or criticisms can be made. It is logical for an explanatory model to combine data supposedly leading to the best possible interpretation. In doing so it is not just about theory or methodology but also about epistemology, since these elements tend to oppose, in a conventional manner, explanation and comprehension. But, epistemologically, where does completeness of data, intended to guarantee the best interpretation, end, and therefore "the collection of evidence" that some want to theorize<sup>22</sup> ? And one might wonder, taking into consideration the "description of the context" if this - surprisingly seen as open - is ultimately not a joker, allowing multiplication of interpretation? However, in our view, if the researcher is included in this context, then we cannot subscribe to this openness, even if this involvement raises further questions about the value of "context" (Robillard 2007, 2008, 2009).

Another fundamental question: how would the plurality of data allow the reduction of the plurality of interpretations? How, for example, would the scientific sphere be "acultural", that is to say, outside elements thought to be from an identity point of view and scientifically significant? In this case, we should consider that the "description of the context" is "culturally" marked and contextualization includes the researcher himself (and not just the "collectors and contributors", and not just as "metadata"), even if logic here would rather want that a corpus can contextualize another corpus.

It is not, however, a lack of reflection, but rather a lack of reflexivity in a situation of intellectual hegemony. In fact for the research communities concerned ("(ALSIC, EIAH, CSCL)"<sup>23</sup> (Chanier, Ciekanski, 2010)), there is no variation in the ways of looking at scientific activities, which must, on the contrary, as in the case of databases, redesign/adapt

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Champin et al. (2003) in Betbeder, Ciekanski, Greffier, Reffay & Chanier (2008).

<sup>23</sup> Respectively: Language Learning and Information and Communication and Information Systems, Technology for Human Learning, Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning.

their ethics, "to implement exchange and free access to [corpora]"<sup>24</sup>. The - purpose of this can however be questioned to the extent that the ethical argument takes the place of epistemology and prevents reflection on the previously asked questions.

This view, in the end, is therefore a form of delocalization of intellectual activities for which the corpus, tools and other standards - in short, the technique (in hyperonymic terms) - become the purposes of study, in terms of time/energy/investment made, and not mere means primarily serving a production of meaning which must first involve the researcher himself.

This delocalization may be required:

"There remains the question of the costs of organizing and structuring such corpora. They become acceptable if the prospect of sharing becomes a reality. [...] This statement, however, wanted to show that the cost of ownership of such a methodology is offset by the prospect of saving time [...]. Another noticeable gain today is the recognition of the researcher's work by the authorities. [...]. This evaluation [of scientific work, according to European or national standards] affects both the individual researcher and his team."(Ibid.)

But it can also be read from the perspective of the *humanities*<sup>25</sup>, as a form of impoverishment which quantitative capitalization of data will fail to meet qualitatively, especially if it comes from ODL programs standardized for this purpose (standards enabling the tracing of activities).

**Another approach: the « Making distance education an asset » example.** In this "research-action" type of program, it is, from a qualitative reflection on ODL development (for adults, in a formative context, in the field of Teaching French as a Foreign/Second language and in different conditions) about establishing or continuing the development of ODL, with several objectives that are tied to stakes, already more or less identified in the literature.

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<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on the sharing of learning corpora, members of Mulce explain: "*These [ethical] rules enacted in an old context certainly need to be considered, but mainly re-considered in the light of new circumstances and challenges*". (Reffay et al, 2008, emphasis added).

<sup>25</sup> This is not, of course, about opposing the technical and the human (see the FADA : CQFD program).

One of the objectives is to promote membership and success of the public concerned, when the difficulties that may arise, for example, to international students as well as to people feeling *a priori* excluded from formative fields, for reasons of physical distance, formative reasons related to the design of systems or methods of guidance that appear "distant" and/or of linguistic-cultural distance constructed by scenarios and exercises perceived as "traditionally scholarly" (and therefore poorly experienced). Issues at this level therefore affect the evolution of representations for ODL and its development in education.

Another objective is to develop a qualitative reflection on the epistemological presuppositions of ODL, their so-called "socio-technical" and teaching functions, and social perspectives. The challenges are manifold: advantages and limitations of standardization/diversity of systems and content/developed resources/management methods of the so-called intercultural dimension/written or online reports, for example.

Finally, the last goal is to show, in a contrastive manner, the implications on face-to-face teaching/learning with, as issues, the new arrangements amongst teachers and between teachers and learners, and therefore the changes needed to support the training of trainers.

To do this, the key problem of the program, broken down into a series of questions, is to ask, through a comparative perspective (and the various ODL components of the program), what makes distance, for whom and why? These ODL programs have, in this respect, a clear interest because the area of intervention - teaching/learning of a language more or less "foreign" - somehow plays a magnifying role, by "forcing" to consider the effects on these trainings of linguistic and cultural diversity, usually seen as inferior.

If one looks at the epistemological level, in order to scientifically demonstrate another possible mode of ODL research, it should be noted that the reflective FaDa program is part of a phenomenological-hermeneutic paradigm involving a redesigned qualitative dimension, which presupposes the reflexive inclusion of the researcher himself in the production process

of the research (see Tours Qualitative 2013). This (alter) reflexivity, which is sometimes overused, considering the many uses that are made of it (Robillard, 2009; see also section 2 above), is linked to the responsibilities taken by the researcher vis-à-vis others involved in his research. It is also linked to ethics in, not only taking into consideration, as a priority, the conditional aspects that will allow the research (supposed to protect people), but also the effects of *a posteriori* induced meaning (preservation being in this way a minimum facet to consider). They depend mainly on what the research relationship (equal) (despite the disparity of locations (Pineau, dir., 1998. 9)) will have allowed to negotiate between the participants of this study in terms of production of meaning (in scientific terms, in particular).

This position therefore has differences in terms of thoughts spontaneously made in many research studies or programs or, as seen above, with similar epistemological backgrounds - a pragmatist socioconstructivism with methodologies of positivist inspiration - sometimes more or less consistent with each other, after all. That deserves a detailed argument that is impossible to achieve here, but it could contain reference to B. Albero's research (in this regard, also see Albéro and Thibault 2009 and Albéro 2012 ), to be read in this sense.

For our purposes here, we mainly need to emphasize, in relation to the PH (phenomenological hermeneutics) approach as proposed by Robillard (2007, 2008, 2009) from the philosophy and linguistics side, based on a major assumption, that meaning is not only semiotic in nature but primarily experiential (Pierozak, Robillard, Razafimandimbimanana, Debono, 2013). Therefore, we claim that all that is experiential, specific to a particular person, is not traceable, despite an electronic environment where all human activity is seen as recordable (the question seemingly reducible to technical considerations, with possible ethical adjustments).

From this point of view, even if we can easily analyze the collusion between digitization and "corpuration" of traces (Pierozak, 2011, to be published), where some (researcher's choice)

contextualize the others, these traces - whether contextualizing or contextualized - can only remain in deficit compared to the original experiential dimension which they are supposed to show. Sources of potential meaning if they are interpreted, they will simply support another experience, an interpretation experience (among others) and may not be used to validate this interpretation rather than another, because all depends on "the direction of interpreter"<sup>26</sup> which he must ethically analyze.

To return to this last part, deep conceptual differences exist, particularly regarding contextualization whose usefulness is even questionable if it does not include the researcher himself (see also section 2 on apriorist contextualization, which removes part of the learning process of contextualization). Indeed, maximum contextualization in terms of educational research (of distance learning) and in the specific context of turning traces into corpora, claims to make the consideration of the interpreter irrelevant, whose production of meaning, however, is necessarily marked and therefore denies the possibility of making interpretations intercultural among researchers, thought of as interchangeable. As seen previously, there is then the risk of a culturalist contextualization.

It appears at the end of this chapter that teaching and didactological practices (observable in ODL) on educational research (among others, distance education) are similar. Forgetting about contextualizing interpreters such as researchers is to be compared with the neglect of people in ODL (whose experiences are also derived from contextualizing interpretations) can be reduced to traces.

We have seen that this reductionism is an obstacle to the development of ODL programs as "intercultural drivers", they are not a priori seen as intercultural. But to consider ODL programs in this way, without warranty of interculturalization, requires both a centering on people and teaching methods (thinking about the (in)adequacies, and therefore, without

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<sup>26</sup> This term replaces the, static, "look" because it emphasizes the importance of considering the whole person and not only his "look", legible in purely intellectual terms. It also emphasizes the (dynamic) fact that "look" is a function of the interpreter's past and how he plans his future involvement.

fetishism, also about teaching tools), and an experiencing of an epistemological paradigm shift (see FADA : CQFD project).

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