Emergent leadership: E-leadership implications for virtual education

DOI: 10.15213/redes.n10.p309

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to emphasize up its main objective how new technologies can assist teachers. The use of information and communication technology in educational settings in the future of teaching is examined with regard to new functions and roles of teachers in coming university distance scenarios. The specific case of the virtual leader and mentor is studied. The article defines and explores the relatively new leadership paradigm of e-leadership that has arisen in little more than a decade. Special attention is given to the following topics: The first section is to develop a theoretical framework to improve understanding of this new form of work related to tutors, the leader and distributed leadership in the virtual environment; also we review literature to build a comprehensive understanding of what constitute e-leadership in organizations. The second section discusses the main strengths and skills of the virtual leader and their importance in the management of education at a distance. We focus on delineating the dimensions of a typology to characterize different types of virtual teams; the dimensions are then used to draw leadership implications. Finally, the general research question guiding this investigation was what will bring about real progress and provide leadership to the virtual or distance learning?

KEYWORDS: E-LEADERSHIP, DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP, DISTANCE AND VIRTUAL EDUCATION, VIRTUAL TEAM
1. INTRODUCTION

Education is an organized process, and becomes more organized with the passage of time, developing into more complex systems which move in more specialized or technical directions. Faced with these emerging new styles and theories, leadership makes a greater difference in the quality and performance of the school. Distance education is not exempt from this principle. These ideas have emerged in recent years, along with the concept of distributed leadership (Hutchins, Graetz, Hartley and Allison, Harris and Chapman, Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, and Kets de Vries are some of his followers mentioned by Carreño, 2008, 2010).

Holistic school curricula that will need to be versatile and cosmopolitan while fitting into the current context of academic standards. The new professional arising to meet these challenges should not only direct this change but work to instill an unwavering humanism with modern values. This novel contribution reflects the characteristics of the new role of teachers and particularly those of one of their core functions: tutorial action. A new role for the professoriate in the emerging millennium has been recognized and encouraged, especially as technology-assisted instruction has proliferated and changed the way teachers and students interact.

In the past, tutorial was presented as a complement to the instructor’s teaching load. It could be used for the timely resolution of questions contained in the agenda, before the review, to improve topics or personal difficulties, and so on. A mentor can be defined as a veteran teacher assigned to a new teacher; veteran here refers to a teacher that is not in his or her first year of teaching. However, the number of years of experience is not necessarily a fixed variable. Within the large spectrum of teaching duties, new tasks and challenges are being added, and tutoring is increasingly being seen as an area planned by the teacher. This may include activities specific to the field, strategic approaches, methodology, objectives, and so on. The existing paradigm is shown to be lacking when mentoring is used in an ad hoc approach without proper planning (Garcia, 2009). These thoughts lead us to the following question: What will bring real progress and provide leadership for virtual and long-distance learning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewing literature shows that the definition of the guardian is becoming more specific. The university-level tutor is not the same, nor can they be the same, as the tutor for primary and secondary school. Mentoring is a meeting
of about an hour’s duration, between a teacher and a group of students, small enough to allow for conversation and discussion.

2.1 THE UNIVERSITY E-TUTOR AND E-TUTORING

A 1989 record of a virtual tutor for the Office of Technology Assessment of the United States Congress states that: “the key to the success of distance learning is the guardian. If the coach is good, the technology becomes almost transparent. On the contrary, no technology can overcome a poor tutorial” (Clark, 2000). Here we must differentiate between teachers and virtual guardians. The former design the course and content, create materials, and plan and develop the methodology and activities. Virtual tutors are the mediators between teacher and student and between content and learning; also virtual tutor must be well versed in a large number of concepts including: Pedagogical technology, communication, ethics, and the organization of ideas and groups. The virtual tutor and the trainer should be extensively trained in these fields and be aware of the impact they may have on the students or participants.

E-tutoring can be defined as teaching, support, management and assessment of students on programmers of study that involve a significant use of online technologies (Clark, 2000). Thus, at first glance, e-tutoring is only different to tutoring in terms of the involvement of technology. Herein, however, are contained vital differences in terms of time, distance and the specific technologies adopted, and these all have implications for teaching staff. The capabilities required can be quite different to face-to-face teaching both in terms of integrating appropriate forms of technology into learning activities and in managing and supporting students’ learning online (Carreño, 2009, 2011).

2.2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR EXAMINING E-LEADERSHIP

The communication in this section defines and explores the relatively new leadership paradigm of e-leadership that has arisen in little more than a decade. In order to present this resume we show it in table number 1. This article presents existing literature on e-leadership relating to universities or schools systems.

This researcher primarily utilized the following databases: EBSCO Online, Emerald Management xtra, Ingenta Connect, and Science Direct. The following major key words, phrases, and their variants were used in researching the databases: e-leadership, eLeadership, virtual leadership. In table 1 presents e-leadership concepts since 1993 to 2010 relating to e-learning.
E-LEADERSHIP CONCEPTS: BY GARCIA 2009

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E-leadership builds on the socio-technical systems approach (Trist, 1950, 1993), according to which organizational effectiveness is determined by how well the social and technical systems are designed to align with each other and the external environment. A main difference between the earlier focus on socio-technical systems and our research of e-leadership is that we believe much less independence exists between social and technical systems than described socio-technical systems are correlative. In this theory we believe that social systems in which AIT are developed and used influence each other reciprocally.

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<th>ORLIKOWSKI ET AL. (1995)</th>
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Described the recursive relationship between AIT and the context in which it is used in their work on "technology-use mediation". Which they define as a deliberate organizationally sanctioned intervention to help adapt new technology within context and to modify the context to accommodate technology use. They view the introduction of new technology as affecting institutions including the leadership systems that run them, just as institutions can affect the use and adaptation of technology.

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Reviewed existing literature to reach a broad understanding of what constitutes e-leadership in organizations. It is the first time of the use of the term e-leadership: — We chose the term e-leadership to incorporate the new emerging context for examining leadership. The authors defined e-leadership as — a social influence process mediated by AIT (advanced information technology) to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and/or performance with individuals, groups, and/or organizations.

They also asserted that e-leadership — can occur at any hierarchical level in an organization, involving both one-to-one as well as one-to-many interactions over electronic media. The authors used the Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) to study how technology and leadership impact each other — more specifically, how technology impacts leadership and is itself changed by leadership. AST is based on the theory that — human action is guided by structures, which are defined as rules and resources that serve as templates for planning and accomplishing tasks. The authors ’research indicated that technology creates organization structures of which leadership is a part, but at the same time, these organization structures continue to be transformed by the impact of leadership and technology. Leadership and technology, therefore, enjoy a recursive relationship, each affecting and at the same time being affected by the other; each transforming and being transformed by the other. Avolio et al. also examined in detail the available research for a special case of advanced information technology called Group Support Systems (GSS). According to the authors, GSS — represents a microcosm.
PULLEY AND SESSA (2001)

Explored the impact of digital technology on leadership and identified e-leadership as a complex challenge that is defined by five key paradoxes: (a) swift and mindful; (b) individual and community; (c) top-down and grass-roots; (d) details and big picture; and (e) flexible and steady. In order for people to overcome the challenge of e-leadership, people in organizations must make sense together of the challenges facing them, and participate in leadership at every level. According to the authors, perhaps the greatest e-leadership challenge is how to make individuals work collectively to create a culture that allows all the voices of leadership to be heard.

ANTONAKIS AND ATWATER (2002)

Noted that the concept of leader distance has been subsumed in a number of leadership theories. This article, amongst other goals, discussed leader distance: how distance is implicated in the legitimization of a leader; and, how distance affects leader outcomes. The authors reviewed available literature and demonstrate that an understanding of leader–follower distance is vital to the task of untangling the dynamics of the leadership influencing process. Distance is physical distance, but also social distance. Both types of distance are studies, with physical distance resulting in the need for virtual leadership. They categorized one type of distance leadership as — virtually close leadership,|| the type of leader that is — referred to as an e-leader, and, noted that — virtual communication may bring several advantages and disadvantages.

ZACCARO AND BADER (2003)

Noted that today’s organizational leader grapples with two interrelated forces: (a) the increasingly global dispersion of divisions and subunits, customers, stakeholders, and suppliers of the organization; and (b) — the exponential explosion in communication technology‖ that has led to — greater frequency of daily interactions with colleagues, coworkers, subordinates and bosses‖ dispersed geographically. The authors postulated that in view of the rapid technology growth in organizations and their increasingly global reach, in the near future — e-leadership will be the routine rather than the exception in our thinking about what constitutes organizational leadership.

HAMILTON AND SCANDURA (2003)

Examined the concept of e-mentoring in a digital world as a necessary corollary to e-leadership; identified potential benefits and challenges; and discussed the opportunity to extend technology to address relationship building and nurturing. Underscoring the importance of mentoring in general, the authors quoted other scholars to justify that in the race to the top, mentoring can make a difference. They discussed the barriers to e-mentoring, such as organizational barriers, individual barriers, interpersonal barriers, and the changing nature of work. The authors explored the e-mentoring dimensions defined by functions and phases. Technology is a critical component of e-mentoring, and the use of technology can be influenced by situational factors, social factors and usability factors. Gender, ethnicity, age and personality also play a part. Integrating technology with the traditional mentoring models is a challenge that must be overcome. The authors concluded the e-mentoring is important and extends the use and flexibility of the traditional mentoring models across time and space.
Argued that although e-leadership is a relatively recently emerged concept with continuing conceptual ambiguity, there are significant differences between leading traditional organizations and those that have technology-mediated environments. These environments appear to require leaders to cope with paradoxes and dilemmas, and with the associated behavioral complexity. The e-leader must necessarily establish an appropriate social climate through sustained communication, and be able to convey exemplary interpersonal skills through the associated technology. E-leadership also poses greater emphasis on dispersed leadership. In some situations, such as anonymous groups, formal leadership may be detrimental to group performance. Although more research is required, even at this early stage in the development of e-leadership it is apparent that leadership in technology-mediated environments as a special niche is important to us.

Explored the new paradigm of work that can now be conducted anytime, anywhere, in real space or through technology. Leadership level, and the linguistic quality in one’s written communication, it was found to predict the emergence of transformational leadership in virtual teams.

Studied virtual teams to identify the best leadership practices of effective leaders of virtual teams. The study collected survey, interview, and observational data and concluded that successful e-leadership practices included the ability to: (a) generate and sustain trust through the utilization of ICT (information and communication technology); (b) make sure that distributed diversity is both clearly understood as well as well appreciated; (c) effectively monitor and manage the life cycles of virtual work; (d) monitor and manage the virtual team’s progress with the use of technology; (e) extend the visibility of virtual members both within the team as well as outside the company; and (f) help ensure that individual team members do benefit from the team.

Studied e-mentoring with reference to the virtual leader. The author focused on the use of information and communication technology in educational settings. The specific case of the virtual leader and mentor was examined. The second section discussed the main strengths and skills of the virtual leader and their importance in the management of education at a distance. Carreño concluded by formulating a research question on providing leadership to the virtual or distance learning.

Presented learning from an interdisciplinary collaborative venture in the virtual environment between four university teams. The exercise was designed to enable students to learn experientially the use of a dynamic social network analysis tools through a variety of projects. Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary collaborating challenged the virtual team members to — rapidly and clearly communicate and demonstrate the value of key principles, processes, and work practices while negotiating multiple levels of complexity, knowledge cultures, skills, and capabilities. The authors proposed a framework for future collaboration.
3. DEFINITIONS AND THE BACKGROUND OF DISTRIBUTED AND TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP

There are few clear definitions of distributed or devolved leadership and those that exist appear to differ from each other, sometimes widely and sometimes more in nomenclature than in essence. One of the most restricted definitions of distributed leadership is that of Kayworth & Leidner (2000), who define distributed leadership as leadership from a remote (physical) location, using only technological means of communication (e-mail, web-based etc).

However, most conceptions of distributed leadership tend to be much broader than this. It is evident that the concept of distributed leadership has a variety of meanings, and that some of these meanings (explicitly and/or implicitly) resemble earlier notions such as collegiality. This prompts the question of whether there is a conception of distributed leadership which takes understanding of leadership further than a re-naming of previous ideas. In conclusion is that it is possible to identify elements that suggest what may be distinctive about the concept of distributed leadership, but that within this significant differences can be identified. In this communication we explain three distinctive elements of the concept of distributed leadership.

1. Firstly, distributed leadership highlights leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals. This contrasts with leadership as a phenomenon which arises from the individual. Gronn’s work is helpful in explicating and elaborating this. What is most distinctive about the notion of distributed leadership is summed up in the second of the meanings identified by Gronn, namely concertive action. Contrasted with numerical or additive action (which is the aggregated effect of a number of individuals contributing their initiative and expertise in different ways to a group or organization), concertive action is about the additional dynamic which is the product of conjoint activity. Where people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or energy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions. There is a tendency in some studies to fall back into structure/agency dualism, whereby leadership is either the result of structural relationships or the result of individual action. Both activity theory and analytical dualism seek to supersede this. Gronn’s view of distributed leadership holds to their wider view (Gronn, 2000).
2. Secondly, distributed leadership suggests openness of the boundaries of leadership. This means that it is predisposed to widen the conventional net of leaders, thus in turn raising the question of which individuals and groups are to be brought into leadership or seen as contributors to it. Of itself, the notion of distributed leadership does not suggest how wide that boundary should be set. However, equally, there are no limits built into the concept. This openness is not limited merely to the extent to which the conventional net is widened within a particular community. It also raises the question of the boundaries of the community within which leadership is distributed (Garcia, 2008).

3. Thirdly, distributed leadership entails the view that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Related to openness of the boundaries of leadership is the idea that numerous, distinct, germane perspectives and capabilities can be found in individuals spread through the group or organization. If these are brought together it is possible to forge a concertive dynamic which represents more than the sum of the individual contributors. Initiatives may be inaugurated by those with relevant skills in a particular context, but others will then adopt, adapt and improve them within a mutually trusting and supportive culture. If distributed leadership is to be seen as distinctive from other formulations of leadership, it is the first of these characteristics — leadership as the product of concertive or conjoint activity, emphasizing it as an emergent property of a group or network — which will underpin it. From this perspective, distributed leadership is an important analytical tool for thinking about leadership and re-orientating thinking about its nature (Garcia, 2008).

There are specific forms of distributed leadership which involve differing features and contexts: different structures, ways of working, aims and values, and ethical and other considerations concerning matters such as rights to participation. In these specific manifestations there are numerous overlaps with other notions of leadership — collegiality, democratic, and so on.

On the other hand, the concept of transformational leadership was introduced by: have vision specific to the situation and generate change (Bass,
The defining idea of leadership facilitation is to exercise power and change **over** others but not **on** them. In persuasive leadership (invitational leadership), these theories are the result of research from hundreds of school leaders across the globe. Another recently developed concept is the concept of sustained leadership: facilitative, persuasive or sustainable. However, it seems that this concept is heavily fraught with debate between researches and productivity experts, and may not endure.

A distributed leadership perspective recognises that there are multiple leaders and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organisations. A distributed model of leadership focuses upon the interactions, rather than the actions, of those in formal and informal leadership roles. It is primarily concerned with **leadership practice** and how leadership influences organisational and instructional improvement. A distributed perspective on leadership acknowledges the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice, whether or not they are formally designated or defined as leaders. Distributed leadership is also central to system reconfigurations and organisational redesigns which necessitate lateral, trans-hierarchical decision making processes (Spillane, 2006).

4. **DISTANCE, VIRTUAL EDUCATION AND VIRTUAL TEAM**

There is a rich body of literature about educational leadership (Hallinger 2006); but there is considerably less that brings together teaching and learning with ict and school leadership. Over the past couple of years however, the attributes of an effective ‘e-leader’ are beginning to be proposed in the literature (Technology Standards for School Administrators (TSSA) Collaborative 2001).

Indeed, research by Dexter (2008) indicates that school leadership plays a central role in achieving technology-related outcomes as the following statement illustrates: ‘our results suggest that a school’s technology efforts are seriously threatened unless key administrators become active technology leaders in a school’ (p 74).

Distance education (DE) “...as generally referred to describe a modality that has been practiced through traditional media, long before the emergence of technologies and digital instructional media. These media were based on paper and similar mediums...”.

Keegan (1996) provides a comprehensive definition of DE as: “teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching” (p. 20). Keegan’s description of the DE environment highlights
various interacting components of DE such as instructor, students and content. Information and communication technology (ICT) makes interaction in this environment possible where every component plays a significant role in producing the desired outcome.

Even though some argue that the role of the instructor does not differ significantly from face-to-face education and DE, Perraton who contend that the instructor’s temporal and spacial removal from the learner presents the unique requirements for effectively managing both the pedagogical and the logistical elements of instruction (Perraton, 2005). These pedagogical elements include motivating students, promoting relevant learning, facilitating access to course content, engaging the learner in activities and discussions through communication, monitoring learners’ progress and adjusting learning opportunities to support learners in areas of difficulty (Darabi y Sikorski, 2006).

In this context, DE often takes a learner-centred approach to instruction whereas; the goal is not the transfer of information but the supervision of learners in their pursuit of knowledge (Darabi y Sikorski, 2006). Furthermore, much of the responsibility for learning is given to the learner while the instructor acts as a coach, facilitator and tutor. In addition to these pedagogical responsibilities, the DE instructor is often required to manage the complex logistical elements involved in employing technology such as the Internet (e.g., Web-based discussion, Web-based video conference, Web-based chat, email, etc.) and satellite communications (Darabi y Sikorski, 2006).

Specifically, the effect that the internet and e-learning have on time and space must be examined. Time and space are the primary dimensions in which the processes of learning and teaching occur. For our purposes, the actors involved in these processes may be in the same place or in different places, yet can interact and communicate at the same time (synchronous or real time) or at different times (asynchronous or deferred) (Sun et al. 2008). Each subset of educational communication resulting from these combinations presents a specific challenge.

Virtual education is a teaching-learning process based on the principles of active pedagogy (the student should take the responsibility of a frequent and effective participation), with the characteristics of distance education (during all classes, or most of them, the students and the teacher will not meet personally, although this could happen in a virtual space), and with the possibility of synchronous or asynchronous interaction (for example, they can chat with each other in real time using internet services, but also by e-mail or participate in e-groups that are asynchronous technologies that don’t require that both are on-line at the same time) (Dias et al. 2014).
4.1. IMPORTANCE OF VIRTUAL TEAM

The literature has tended to treat virtual teams as a single “ideal” type, yet there are several dimensions or characteristics that vary among and distinguish different types of virtual teams. We focus on four such characteristics — *temporal distribution, boundary spanning, lifecycle, and member roles*.

The concept of a “team” is described as a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. It is important to notice that getting a group of people to work together (physically) is not enough to make this group of people into a “team”. Teams are different from working groups.

Virtual teams are created to handle a variety of tasks that range from the simple (e.g., brainstorming) to the complex (e.g., command and control). We will argue that virtual teams need to adopt different characteristics to successfully operate within the constraints that are imposed by the complexity of their collective task.

Literature related to virtual teams revealed a lack of depth in the definitions. Although virtual teamwork is a current topic in the literature on global organizations, it has been problematic to define what ‘virtual’ means across multiple institutional contexts (Lu et al., 2005). The concept of a “team” is described as a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Zenun et al., 2007). It is worth mentioning that virtual teams are often formed to overcome geographical or temporal separations.

Virtual teams work across boundaries of time and space by utilizing modern computer driven technologies. The term “virtual team” is used to cover a wide range of activities and forms of technology-supported working (Anderson et al., 2007). Virtual teams are comprised of members who are located in more than one physical location. This team trait has fostered extensive use of a variety of forms of computer-mediated communication that enable geographically dispersed members to coordinate their individual efforts and inputs (Peters and Manz, 2007).

Ebrahim et al. (2009) defined “virtual team as a group of people and subteams who interact through interdependent tasks guided by common purpose and work across links strengthened by information, communication, and transport technologies”. Another definition suggests that virtual teams are distributed work teams whose members are geographically dispersed and...
coordinate their work predominantly with electronic information and communication technologies (e-mail, video-conferencing, telephone, etc.).

Also virtual teams are groups of individuals collaborating in the execution of a specific project while geographically and often temporally distributed, possibly anywhere within (and beyond) their parent organization. Powell et al. 2004: “we define virtual teams as groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information technologies to accomplish one or more organization tasks”.

Dexter, S. (2008) and Moyle (2006) suggest effective leaders who support teaching and learning with information and communications technologies (ICT) have a good, personal understanding of pedagogy with technologies (how students learn and how ICT can be embedded into teaching and learning). These school leaders display the following attributes concerning the relationships between pedagogies and technologies:

a. Credibility and authority among their peers;
b. An absence of fear of boundaries;
c. A futures perspective;
d. A global perspective;
e. Political nous;
f. A student-centred view of what makes for good learning and good classroom practices;
g. A good understanding of the likely impacts across the school of the ICT decisions they make (Moyle 2006).

Finally, a summation of the existing research offers an answer to the next question:

*What real contribution does leadership provide to distributed, virtual or distance education?*

If one starts from the premise that the three dimensions involved in virtual education are in fact distinct (or asynchronous) space-time elements it could be said that the virtual leader should use distributed leadership to promote socialization and its functioning within the group. Innovation is the key to success in the virtual process, arising in the form of new styles and strategies to augment or supplant the basic learning process. The virtual leader must be prepared to implement educational reforms both internally and externally, contributing positively to the effectiveness of the organization, which in this
case is education itself. Authority lines should be clear, but ideas should flow among all the participants, and decisions should be made on a group as opposed to individual basis.

Virtual education directly depends on technology, thus virtual leaders must be able to manage the ever-evolving nature of technology while maintaining balance within the group of educators and students. Distributed leadership, seen as a new emergent feature of an interacting network or group of individuals, is a form of action that arises when people work. When the concept of distributed leadership is viewed within a network of group interaction, it is seen how technology and virtuality can be perfectly adapted to the model. While certain group members may initially possess concentrations of skills, the distributive process itself acts a facilitator by which the group may appropriate these capabilities and use them communally, though this depends on the competency and skill of the virtual leader.

Finally, cooperation, in terms of the globalized individual, accepts differences and diversity and is actively enriched by them. This leaderless-style of leadership is ultimately a community leadership, leading to the emergence of an organizational entity that is, from a holistic or systemic perspective, more than the sum of its constituent parts. Here the two indivisible faces of the singular process appear: the individual and the collective transformation. These processes are fundamentally united because neither can advance without the other, and in recognizing this we must discard the linear logic promoted by the old paradigm which leads us to promote one over the other. The values that guide this change, on both a personal and community level, are emerging everywhere today in the minds and hearts of the members of humanity.

The most effective style of leadership to ensure and continuously improve the quality of distance education (and the instructional technology that accompanies it) is one that is based on knowledge of the aforementioned variables, concepts and principles. When they are properly combined an effective distance education strategy can be implemented.

This should be both a participatory and distributed leadership: participatory because it should facilitate the participation of everyone in decision-making process and the execution of appropriate actions, and distributed because the power and authority should be distributed appropriately to all group members involved in management. Quality management in distance education should be conducted independently of the existence of a formal system for evaluating and monitoring quality. In the absence of such a structured system, the actors involved in the process must reach agreements to establish minimum acceptable standards for use in evaluation and quality management.
The exercise of leadership for effective management of the quality of distance education is a complex but not impossible task. It includes, above all, an understanding of the three-dimensionality that distance education operates within, which consists of the dimensions of space, time and virtually.

With time, leadership has evolved along with educational organizations and the process of education itself. Education has moved from a primarily unidirectional and printed form to a medium which includes distance learning and audiovisual integration. Audiovisual teaching has evolved from support training in computer science, to the era of telematics in which we are currently immersed. Today’s widely available technology is creating a revolution in the process and dynamic of education.

Reviewed the literature and types of leadership, it is evidenced that distributed leadership naturally promotes democracy and instills its own intrinsic values, and is the leadership type best adapted to the virtual world. As theory admits, certain skills may initially be concentrated in one member of a group, but the leader acts simply as the facilitator of a process which leads to the appropriation of these skills by the group as a whole. Thus the essence of distributed leadership is cooperation: accept the differences, embrace the diversity, and foster an appreciation for them from a systemic and holistic perspective, enabling the group to be more than the sum of its constituent parts.

In virtual leadership, integration plays a key role throughout the educational process by allowing effective leadership in achieving the goals and objectives and of the programs and projects in distance education. The virtual leader must have the following strengths and skills: extensive knowledge of the subject matter, design experience, management skills, and a broad vision of distance education.

E-leadership is a new leadership paradigm that requires the leader to achieve these leadership objectives in a computer-mediated manner with virtual teams that are dispersed over space and time, the main medium of communication amongst leader(s) and followers being the electronic conduit supported by computers. What is very different is that the e-leader may never physically meet one or more of the followers. The new paradigm provides a plethora of new opportunities, as well as a number of new challenges.

As the nature of work in today’s organizations becomes more complex, dynamic, and global, there has been an increasing emphasis on far-flung, distributed, virtual teams as organizing units of work. Despite their growing prevalence, relatively little is known about this new form of work unit.

In conclusion, virtual education is a teaching-learning process based on the principles of active pedagogy (the student should take the responsibility
of a frequent and effective participation), with the characteristics of distance education (during all classes, or most of them, the students and the teacher will not meet personally, although this could happen in a virtual space), and with the possibility of synchronous or asynchronous interaction (for example, they can chat with each other in real time using internet services, but also by e-mail or participate in e-groups that are asynchronous technologies that don’t require that both are on-line at the same time).

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