

Pandemic Experiences in a Higher Education Institution in Northern Portugal - Lessons for the Present and the Future

Vivências da Pandemia numa Instituição de Ensino Superior do Norte de Portugal - Lições para o Presente e para o Futuro

ISSN 2177-8310
DOI: 10.18264/eadf.v11i2.1487

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Abstract

This study aims to present the experience of a public university in the North of Portugal at the time of adapting to the scenario and the urgencies of the pandemic caused by the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Together with the articulation with relevant and recent theoretical references on the topic, the text brings experiences that are capable of reflection and learning for present and future moments. From the report presented here, a new perspective on the teaching performance that reverberates through the issue of continuing education for teaching is perceived. It should be noted that, when opting for the implementation of remote emergency teaching, gaps were highlighted regarding the use and framing of resources from digital technologies along with educational processes.

Keywords: Digital technologies. Emergency remote teaching. Pandemic. Teacher training. Teaching performance.



Received 05/15/2021
Accepted 06/28/2021
Published 06/14/2021

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

ABNT: ALMEIDA, C. M. Vivências da Pandemia numa Instituição de Ensino Superior do Norte de Portugal - Lições para o Presente e para o Futuro. **EaD em Foco**, v. 11, n. 2, e1487, 2021.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18264/eadf.v11i2.1487>.

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Resumo

O presente estudo se propõe a apresentar a experiência de uma universidade pública do Norte de Portugal no momento da adequação ao cenário e às urgências da pandemia provocada pela disseminação do vírus Covid-19. Conjuntamente com a articulação com referenciais teóricos relevantes e recentes sobre o tema, o texto traz vivências passíveis de reflexão e de aprendizado para momentos presentes e futuros. A partir do relato aqui apresentado, percebe-se um novo olhar sobre a atuação docente que reverbera pela questão da formação continuada para a docência. Note-se que, ao optar pela implantação do ensino remoto de emergência, lacunas foram evidenciadas no que se refere ao uso e ao enquadramento dos recursos advindos das tecnologias digitais junto aos processos educativos.

Palavras-chave: *Tecnologias digitais. Ensino remoto de emergência. Pandemia. Formação docente. Atuação docente.*

1. Introduction

The context of the pandemic with the increasing spread of the Covid-19 virus has changed the world in many ways. One of the most evident in this period and which interests us in this work highlights the essential and innovative uses of digital technologies. In the field of Education, in the first half of 2020 (between March and April), more than 190 countries ended face-to-face activities in educational institutions, at different levels, in compliance with the determinations of the health authorities in order to isolate, confine the population and, thus, contain the spread of the virus (UNESCO, 2020). Given the closing of schools and universities and the need to keep the school year going, three initiatives with the use of digital technologies stood out in several European countries - including Portugal (UNESCO, 2020).

The first initiative - and the one that we will, in fact, focus more on throughout this text - dealt with the urgent implementation of remote teaching practices mediated by digital resources to replace face-to-face classes that were urgently interrupted. The second action focused on mobilizing educational communities (teachers, researchers...) in favor of re-planning and continuing the school year. And the third point was intended to form technical support networks for teachers and students in the face of the new reality that was imposed (UNESCO, 2020). As new views were given to educational processes, we believe it is necessary, at this time, to reflect on these issues in order to understand the past and present implications and future perspectives on the theme.

The situation of exceptionality and unpredictability caused by the pandemic led students and teachers to build a new relationship with teaching, temporarily abstaining from the face-to-face moments that so characterize the school trajectory. In public higher education institutions in the North of Portugal, emergency remote teaching (HODGES et al, 2020) - basically performed through synchronous sessions supported by videoconferencing systems - was recognized as the most viable way out for the maintenance of the year academic and the bond between the parties.

In addition to the learning process, there was a need to think of strategies to minimize the impacts of social isolation and the emotional consequences of such a situation - such as sadness, anxiety and loneliness visible in teachers and students (ASSUNÇÃO FLORES E SWEENEN, 2020; MOREIRA, 2020, NOBRE et al, 2020). Thus, it was up to the teacher, in addition to transmitting knowledge, to assume, in this context of the HEIs in Northern Portugal, the figure of a mediator of interpersonal relationships, still acting as an encourager, moderator and evaluator (MOREIRA, 2020). This teacher was also expected to act “in support and encouragement to students, regulating and guiding their emotions, affections and attitudes” (MOREIRA, 2020, p.4).

For Ferri et al (2020), this is the biggest educational challenge and experimentation faced to date. Hence the relevance, according to Ferri et al (2020), of understanding the moment and analyzing “the challenges related to distance education in emergencies and indicating proposals for action to face them”. Possible mismatches between teacher preparation and the full use of digital tools evidenced in the context of the pandemic in Portugal (ASSUNÇÃO FLORES E GAGO, 2020, ASSUNÇÃO FLORES E SWEENEN, 2020, DIAS-TRINDADE et al, 2020, MOREIRA et al, 2020) was the subject of constant debate during this period and it is from there that we justify the present work.

It was time, according to De Sousa Santos (p.5, 2020), when talking about the world crisis caused by the pandemic, the weaknesses previously existing in the educational sphere became even more evident adapting to a “normality of the exception” that we can even think as being “permanent” in the face of the uncertain scenario of containing the spread of the virus. It was thus necessary to seek a way out for Education, for the total non-paralysis of higher education institutions so that students would not be “abandoned” in a moment of crisis (NÓVOA, 2020). And so, following the determination of international bodies, in March 2020 and reaching most of the world, a long period of confinement and social distancing began.

Based on the context narrated here, this work aims to highlight, through evaluative considerations and the review of recent literature on the subject, relevant traits of the experience and adaptation to the pandemic emergencies based on the experience in a higher education institution North of Portugal. Special emphasis is given to the weaknesses of the moment and the implications of such an experience with the application of remote emergency education (HODGES et al, 2020) for the future. The work is based on a case study, added to the look of a professional who has been working for over 15 years in the field of implementation and monitoring of projects in Distance Education. The document analysis focuses on official documents from HEIs analyzed with project developer sectors using digital technologies.

2. Adaptations to the pandemic context

On a global scale never before faced, schools and universities around the world were closed to contain the spread of the virus and classroom classes cancelled. In higher education institutions in Northern Portugal, face-to-face moments were replaced by what was initially called online teaching, but which was later understood as emergency remote teaching (HODGES et al, 2020, MURPHY, 2020).

To make up for the lack of open educational institutions and with the school year in progress, teachers reinvented their practices, re-planned their actions and invested in distance educational actions supported by digital tools (ASSUNÇÃO FLORES, 2020, MOREIRA et al, 2020, NOBRE et al, 2020). In HEIs across the country, synchronous sessions were multiplied as spaces of confluence between students and teachers, disseminated through videoconference resources, in an effort to transpose the actions initially designed for face-to-face teaching to the remote setting, in an essentially perspective instrumental (MOREIRA et al, 2020, DIAS-TRINDADE et al, 2020). Emergency remote education (HODGES et al, 2020) was the solution adopted by public higher education as a quick response to the demands of the moment. In a widely digitized society, it would be unthinkable not to use these resources to support Education (NÓVOA, 2020).

The supposed lack of knowledge and preparation for distance educational practices meant that digital platforms were not properly explored in this context. Although the country was undergoing a digitization project - Action Plan for Digital Transition - which involved, among other points, educational institutions and the development of digital skills and abilities in teachers, it was clear that there were gaps that need to be revised and resolved. If, on the one hand, the adoption of digital technologies allowed the school year to continue, on the other, it unraveled issues related to continuing education and teacher resistance at odds with the project to digitize teaching and generate new practices.

In the public HEI analyzed here, official data collected from the sector responsible for the development of projects with digital technologies show us that even with the total absence of face-to-face meetings, the inclusion of curricular units in Moodle (Virtual Learning Environment adopted by the university) had a lower increase than could be expected at that time. In 2018/2019, for example, there were 33% of the curricular units offered by the IES available in Moodle. In 2020/2021, the number rose to 53%. If we consider that, during this period, the university offered a series of continuing education to teachers regarding the use of digital tools, this increase becomes even less significant. In the case of the analyzed university, there is greater emphasis and adherence to distance practices by the Faculties of Engineering, Science and Languages.

Although, at that time, there was no technical team to support the development of projects in this format - there are no distance learning technicians or instructional designers available at the university for this monitoring -, we recognize that the option for emergency remote teaching represented a added value in allowing the continuity of studies and in provoking, albeit forcibly, new experiments with the use of digital technologies, generating possibilities for interventions in the educational path of teachers and possible consequences for the future (DIAS-TRINDADE, 2020). The organization of learning in systems of "capillarity", in "new spaces dispersed in time and space", was another point that could be considered for the moment of crisis (NÓVOA, 2020), and which possibly generates new experiments for the future.

New learning and skills - more urgent in the current context - were added to curricula initially designed for on-site teaching (UNESCO, 2020). A special emphasis was given to aspects involving care for the other, health, autonomy, in addition to those involving the technological aspects of remote study. A certain curricular flexibility was necessary in order to have a necessary contextualization to ensure the relevance of what was taught and to contain student dropout (UNESCO, 2020). At the university in question, the synchronous sessions were maintained even to meet the wide range of foreign students who, for personal reasons, had to return to their countries of origin at that time.

In parallel with the pandemic framework, the government of Portugal launched, in 2020, the Action Plan for Digital Transition - Portugal Digital - for the implementation of actions in the scope of Education, economy and state. Among other points, the measure aims to develop, in the coming years, projects for training and digital inclusion of people in order to reach schools, students and teachers. The initiative, based on the study of society's technological habits, provides for a series of actions to boost the digitization of the country.

3. Option for remote emergency learning

In Portugal, face-to-face classes at higher education institutions were interrupted on March 16, 2020. More specifically on higher education, the Ministry of Science and Technology announced that every effort should be made from then on in order to maintain itself communication between students and teachers through digital tools (MCTES, 2020). This measure proved to be an important strategy in the fight to contain the spread of the virus by promoting distance between people while maintaining the bond between teachers and students.

It was agreed to call the educational actions urgently implemented in the context of the pandemic as emergency remote education (HODGES ET AL, 2020). Rather than composing the typical planning stages of projects focused on online education, emergency remote education (or ERE) is characterized, among other aspects, by the transposition of what would be taught in face-to-face teaching to remote actions by a certain period of time of crisis. The term emerged as a highlight in the pandemic period precisely to distinguish it from the specifics about the online model. It is characterized by an action whose initial support (in-person teaching) will be returned as soon as the crisis situation ends. The focus for actions in this format is not “to recreate a robust educational system, but to provide temporary access to educational supports and content quickly” (HODGES ET AL, 2020). On the subject, there are references on the use of such methodology in situations of war or disasters, with the aim of maintaining the protection of children and adolescents (GUSSO ET AL, 2020).

Although it uses educational platforms and digital resources, the ERE differs from the methodology applied in projects designed for the online model. One of the differentiating elements between the modalities deals precisely with the question of the planning stage. In the urgency to adapt to the new reality of pandemic emergency, there was only time for adjustments and adaptations without the development, for example, of a model that actually considered the potential of online education and the tools that would be used there (MOREIRA et al, 2020, GUSSO et al, 2020). This initiative proved to be a quick response to an urgent and temporary demand for a predetermined crisis. Its implications, however, are potentially relevant to be understood for us to think about possible future emergency situations (Ferri and Guzzo, 2020).

For Hogdes et al (2020), remote emergency education is exactly what was experienced in 2020 and 2021 - a solution essentially marked by the temporary availability of content via online in order to maintain the link between students, teachers and educational institution for a moment of exceptionality such as that experienced due to the pandemic. It is not, therefore, a solution to be tried in the long term. The planning of a course to be taught in the distance mode takes six to nine months (HODGES et al, 2020). Unlike emergency remote teaching, online teaching is intensively marked by the stages of planning, production, monitoring and evaluation, reinforcing the importance of being applied in the long term.

The table below seeks, in summary, to present the main differences between the ERE and online education.

Chart 1: Based on Hodges et al (2020).

Emergency Remote Teaching	Online teaching
Short term actions	Long term actions
Immediate solutions	Planned solutions
Applied in a crisis circumstance	Applied in a normal circumstance
Transposition of planned practices to face-to-face teaching	Application of Planned Practices for Online Teaching
Excessive synchronous actions	Balance between synchronous and asynchronous actions
Information transfer process	Social and cognitive process

In the course of applying emergency remote learning, some issues became even more evident. One of them, according to data from UNESCO (2020) available in the document entitled What have we learned? Overview of findings from a survey of education ministries on national responses to COVID-19, relates to the issue of access to digital resources. Emergency remote learning appears to have been an efficient solution for higher-income groups and countries (UNESCO, 2020). Although it is recognized that most countries used strategies for this moment, for many individuals, the lack or difficulty in accessing the

resources made available proved to be an obstacle. The same document points out that most countries in the world (UNESCO, 2020) have implemented actions to urgently minimize the damages related to this issue by offering equipment - notebooks and mobile phones - and free internet to students of different levels of education.

The challenges opened up by the experience of closing educational institutions and the transposition of on-site to emergency remote teaching are crucial for thinking about proposals and initiatives for the future that are more in line with the Digital Transition Plan, in progress in Portugal, and with digitization strategies for the countries that make up the European Union. These understandings and proposals are directed to the government and decision makers, in order to guarantee with what is announced in the UNESCO document (2020) as an “Equitable and inclusive quality education” promoting “lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

4. New teaching proposal

Teachers played a fundamental role in the adaptation scenario caused by the pandemic by responding quickly to the demands that arose with the closure of face-to-face activities in Portugal. They were assigned the tasks of re-planning and reorganizing the school year, adjusting the methodology, content and activities, making even more evident the fundamental role of the teacher in educational processes (GUSSO et al, 2020, ASSUNÇÃO FLORES E GAGO, 2020, NÓVOA, 2020). Added to this, many professors had to assume their lack of knowledge regarding the various digital tools and learn to deal with the new requirements that were imposed (FERRI et al, 2020, ASSUNÇÃO FLORES, 2020, EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2021). According to a UNESCO report (2020, p.13), “the new conditions have required that the professor uses virtual platforms and methodologies with them that he is not necessarily familiar with”.

New roles were played. More than the role of transmitter of knowledge, teachers were assigned the role of moderator and motivator in interpersonal relationships and creator of content for remote education (MOREIRA, 2020, GUSSO et al, 2020). All this in order to keep connected to this reality. Communication between the parties also proved to be essential to break the transactional distance (MOORE, 2002) typical of non-presential education. According to Moreira et al (2020, p.352), “the virtualization of educational systems... presupposes changing their models and practices and obliges the teacher to assume new roles, communicating in ways they were not used to.”.

Aiming to minimize gaps in the continuing education of teachers for the use of digital tools, the HEIs quickly and urgently increased the volume of training. In the public university analyzed for this work, the Nucleus of Educational Technologies started to offer, since 2020, a portfolio of courses, permanently and no longer on demand, to the institution’s professors. Among the courses offered to teachers are the one on Using Moodle; Multimedia and Audiovisual Production; Academic Integrity; Flipped Classroom and Distance Learning. In addition to training, there was an increase in ongoing training through webinars and other actions promoted by the nucleus. However, even with this effort to train teachers in the use of digital technologies, there was a predominance, throughout all time, of synchronous sessions via teleconference as a mere transposition of what would be explained in person in the classroom.

Regarding the use of free software Moodle, at the observed university, until June 2021, there were more than 35 thousand active users on the platform and 4,493 curricular units available. Between 2019 and 2021, there was an increase of 14.47% in the number of available course units, from 3,925 to 4,493. Regarding the number of tests (in quiz format) available, there was an increase of 25.62%, going from 6,408 to 8,050. These numbers – considering the context of the closing of the HEI at the time of the pandemic – demonstrate a more significant effort than that perceived in previous years. Between 2016 and 2018, there was an increase of 76.89% in the number of curricular units.

Communication and interaction between the parties represent an essential variable of educational processes designed with the use of digital resources and moments of asynchronous communication. The tooling domain is not enough if there is not among those involved a feeling of belonging to that environment. Dialogue and interaction are variables that determine the transactional distance and that must be promoted and encouraged by the teacher in their performance in distance models (MOORE, 2002). By agreeing that it is from the interaction with others and with the means that subjects develop (VYGOTSKY, 1988) we further reinforce the relevance of these moments for both classroom and distance teaching methodologies. In Vygotsky's (1988) sociocultural theory, the interactions promoted there in the educational space - whether carried out in the digital or physical sphere - constitute the basis for learning.

Most higher education institutions in Portugal maintained the interaction between those involved through synchronous sessions via the most popular free videoconferencing systems in the market - Zoom, Teams, Meet... (GUSSO et al, 2020) Surely, a perhaps the easiest way to transmit content, but that does not consider or explore the features and tools available in the resources designed for online teaching (GUSSO et al, 2020). Although contact is maintained between teacher-student and, in a way, the synchronous moment of communication in the classroom is reproduced, the learning process is greatly reduced to a single tool. Other viable and meaningful possibilities and paths for online teaching are left out.

Uncertainties about the future and preparation for new emergency situations may lead educational institutions to rethink practices to be applied in online moments. The limited content of these actions in higher education (GUSSO et al, 2020) worked to highlight that teaching "cannot constitute a practice without planning, improvisation and with merely bureaucratic characteristics".

5. Conclusions

Digital technologies have emerged, more than in previous historical times, as relevant tools and capable of intertwining with educational practices as long as they are well managed and contextualized. The moment of pandemic has shown us that mere incorporation is not enough for digital technologies to play a recognized and significant role in education. In the case analyzed here, gaps and resistance on the part of teachers to adhere to emergency remote teaching in its entirety were perceived, focusing only on synchronous sessions of videoconferences. Few initiatives were noticed in order to better take advantage of the features of Moodle - platform adopted by the analyzed HEI.

The institutional challenges are many and include awareness, adherence and continuing education of teachers and also the implementation of online teaching strategies as priorities for the future, drawing positive experiences from there. If we analyze the context under the bias of emergency remote teaching, we will notice that the difficulties in adapting to the model were due to the lack of technical staff capable of following the process (such as instructional designers), the lack of preparation and inclusion of tools in everyday classroom practices and lack of knowledge about how to implement something similar. From there, it became clear that the time and space for learning need to be redesigned, that there is space and need to invest in technical personnel capable of following up on future projects, and especially that there is an urgent need to incorporate digital possibilities in higher education with a focus on increasing engagement in future projects using digital tools.

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