


Chapter 9

Online Learning or Emergency Remote Teaching?

Reflections on Online Learning as Pedagogical Innovation in a Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

Following the recent measures implemented worldwide as result of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, educational institutions needed to implement online learning practices, demanding a rapid appropriation of digital skills by teachers and students. The Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre, in Portugal, was one of the higher education institutions (IES) that organized a transition process for this teaching model. The objectives of the study focused on the characterization of the online learning process, including the practice of online learning and the students' perspectives regarding the future of online learning. The results obtained, from 420 validated questionnaires, point to a positive evaluation of this pedagogical experience, with some particularities listed in certain areas of the teaching and learning process, suggesting an in-depth analysis on the level of digital skills on the part of teachers and students in order to consolidate distance learning as a true pedagogical innovation process and not just as an "emergency remote teaching" experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The technological means that revolutionized the daily life of societies in the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have recently assumed an essential role in different areas of society, as a consequence of measures that have been implemented on a global scale to deal with the pandemic caused by the COVID-19. Among these measures is the implementation of rules of social distance and the change in behavior, aspects that were also reflected in the teaching and learning processes, across several educational institutions, including higher education institutions.

The Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre, while Higher Education Institution (HEI), in Portugal, has been investing in the last few years and strategically in a quality management system based on a path of continuous improvement of the services provided by the institution, with a view to the satisfaction of the interested parties, namely students, staff and institutional partners.

In this way and considering the importance of the self-assessment process as an instrument for monitoring the quality of the performance of a higher education institution, a questionnaire survey was applied to students of the Polytechnic of Portalegre, in the academic year of 2019/2020, with the intention to evaluate the online learning process implemented in the schools that integrate this HEI, following the interruption of face-to-face lessons, due to the lockdown imposed by the Portuguese government due to the pandemic COVID19, corresponding, almost entirely, to the second semester of the academic year 2019 / 2020.

This text seeks to demonstrate that, although online learning is not an innovative practice in the context of training provided in higher education, it has gained broader and generalized outlines following the “forced” migration in the period identified above, leading to a reflection process that mobilized the educational community of this HEI, including professors, students, non-teaching staff and management structures.

The objectives inherent to this research are fundamentally related to the intention of gathering a set of empirical and theoretically informed data regarding the advantages, difficulties and potentialities arising from a pedagogical practice in the context of online learning, especially when this practice was prepared and implemented in record time.

On the other hand, as suggested in the title of this text, we seek, based on the information collected, to reflect on whether we are facing a real process of online learning and pedagogical innovation or if the implemented experience is closer to a practice that we designate for “remote emergency teaching” (Grilo, 2020).

The relevance and the empirical and theoretical implications that we believe to have achieved with this research, centered on an HEI, are in the learning that this process induced with its protagonists, in particular professors and students, leading to a more in-depth reflection which aiming to correct aspects that, in the context of online learning, became visible from the evaluation that the students themselves carried out, by completing the aforementioned questionnaire, applied to the universe of students enrolled in the various study cycles offered by the Polytechnic of Portalegre.

Thus, at first, a brief incursion into the literature on the topic of online learning is carried out, to then present a set of empirical information, whose focus is to demonstrate the singularities inherent to a generalized pedagogical practice, largely implemented over a reduced period of time.

After a sociodemographic characterization of the students participating in the study, some quantitative data are presented. These data are centered on the online learning process, seeking to capture the

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