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The social representation of distance education from a Brazilian perspective

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Abstract

This quali-quantitative, exploratory field study approach is based on analyzing data obtained by applying the word recall test involving 100 respondents in order to build the social representation of distance learning (DL) from a Brazilian viewpoint. The 'four-house board' technique by Pierre Vergès was adopted as the data-treatment technique. Making use of theoretical concepts previously presented to discuss distance learning (DL), the social representation of DL is compared to this theory, in order to validate the knowledge and identify learning gaps. It was found that the main focus of the social representation of DL consists of the following words: Flexibility, Facility, Practicality, Discipline, Time, Low-cost, Cost, Opportunity, Internet and Convenience. The main conclusion is that, despite the positive outlook that Brazilians have of distance learning, some assumptions should be adopted to ensure its effectiveness: 1) the need to mix DL with classroom encounters; 2) the need for DL-based courses to have trained teachers that insist on interaction and 3) the need for material to be suitable for this form of education, as well as for the communication media and technologies used.

Keywords: Learning. Education. DL. Social representation.

1 Introduction

With the advent of the internet and advances in information and communications technology (ICT), distance education, which used to be restricted to a small niche within the educational sector, has grown and taken on greater relevance in academic

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discussions. The expansion of this method of teaching has been responsible for a true revolution in the educational field, due to the greater access it provides for those with fewer resources, and thus it has contributed to a reduction in social inequality. Brazilian governments have used distance education as an efficient way to diminish Brazil's problems in terms of access to education (GOMES, 2013).

Distance education is based on the student's initiative, using his or her skills to interact and solve problems in groups, and does not permit the simple memorization of content. In other words, learning based on "knowing how to do something" and not just "knowing facts," which only occurs when one breaks from the traditional model of teaching (LITTO; FORMIGA, 2008).

Distance education, through the use of computational resources, has appeared as a way to stimulate a new model of learning, facilitating the construction of knowledge and helping students to be active participants and transformers of reality. It is an educational process (TAPERINO, 2006) focused on developing skills, centered on student learning, allowing students to grow as people, professionals and citizens.

There is a scarcity of education in the world, with greater growth in the number of students than in the growth of the number of universities (DANIEL, 1996), or in other words, there is a disconnection that is increasing social inequality.

However, there are various critiques of the distance education model, made by those who consider it to be a form of scientific management of education, homogenizing learning and recalling the machines of the industrial era (PATTOL, 2013). From this perspective, to Zuin (2006), distance education is distant education. Pattol (2013) criticizes distance education, especially for higher education, because he considers it to be commercialized education.

Belloni (1999) warns that many research studies have found that most distance education is actually passive, and that students do not participate in the use of the knowledge learned, and end up lacking motivation to continue their studies. The professor is merely a service provider who is at the student's beck and call, and is considered as an animator of audiovisual spectacles (BELLONI, 1999; ZUIN, 2006). To Zuin (2006), the distance education courses which have been successful have been those that have encouraged a greater interaction between professors and students through technological means.

Despite a number of articles about distance education due to this area's growth, we were unable to find an investigative approach whose objective was to

understand how Brazilians view distance education in terms of the theory of social representation. As noted by Silva and Mercado (2015), researchers have displayed greater interest in studies related to educational information technology.

There has been a great growth in distance education in Brazil, especially in higher education, with a 52.5% increase in registration from 2011 to 2012 (ABED, 2015). According to Litto and Formiga (2008), there was a gradual growth in registration for distance education beginning in 2000, which accelerated in 2005 due to the creation of the Brazilian Open University (UAB). There has also been a significant growth in distance education in the United States, but the growth has been more moderate than in Brazil. According to He et al. (2014), more than 6.7 million students of higher education are taking at least one course online. 69.0% of the American institutions include distance education as a critical part of their long-term strategy. According to Allen et al. (2016) there was an increase of 3.9% from 2013 to 2014 in the number of students who are taking at least one course online.

In addition to this, if one pays attention to the growth of distance education courses during the past decade, it is clear that there is a need for more research about this area. In this way, the main objective of this article is to understand how distance education is perceived by the Brazilian population by their responses to the following investigative question: What is the social representation of distance education from the point of view of Brazilians? According to Dias et al. (2016), the use of Social Representation considers the object studied, in this case distance education, as a socially constructed human activity. It reveals the voices of the people involved with this type of education, who are influential in terms of "the a priori orientation and a posteriori justification of the positions they take and the behavior they express" (DIAS et al., 2016, p. 270). In this way, it is of academic and managerial interest to understand how distance education is seen by the actors involved in this type of education.

2 Distance Education

2.1 Education *versus* Teaching

There must be a distinction made between distance Education and Teaching, because distance teaching is often confused with distance education. To ABED (2016):

> Education is conceived of as a group of active, dynamic, mutable personal experiences through which the individual selects, absorbs and incorporates information, relating it to what is already in his or her repertoire, and reorganizing, expressing or using it to create

> new information that orients their actions, using it to act together with other people or change their environment (ABED, 2016, p. 1).

Also according to ABED:

> Teaching is essentially a relationship of interpersonal assistance in which someone with greater experience and more knowledge influences other people in various ways: lecturing, orienting, showing, explaining, demonstrating, exemplifying, asking, answering, stimulating, correcting, organizing debates, supervising, clarifying, preparing, proposing and accompanying activities, encouraging and guiding the learner in terms of the proper use of materials and resources, facilitating appropriate understanding and performance, and providing the fundamentals of a science, technique, art or skill (ABED, 2016, p. 1).

In this way, as defined by Litto and Formiga (2008), educating is not just teaching, because it goes beyond the simple transmission of knowledge. Romanzini (2001) states that the expression "distance teaching" is the most correct form to identify distance education, given that teaching is an external process as in the expression "distance." However, there are those who have a broader vision of distance education, considering it to be a type of education. According to Costa and Cochi (2014), distance education in the Brazilian context is a type of education that is part of social policy, which besides making economic development possible, diminishes income inequality, creates opportunities and improves living standards.

2.2 Characteristics of distance education in Brazil and the World

In global terms, educational communication that sought to promote learning or instruction between physically separated people arose in antiquity, but more specifically in Greece and Rome with the exchange of written messages. However, distance education in an institutionalized form arose in the nineteenth century with the creation of correspondence schools (SARAIVA, 1996). In Brazil, correspondence teaching dates back to the beginning of the last century and the Brazilian Universal Institute and the Monitor Institute (ALMEIDA BIZARRIA et al., 2015).

Litto and Formiga (2008) emphasize the creation of the University of the Air in the United Kingdom in 1963 as an important contribution to the institutionalization

of distance education. It used various audiovisual resources such as TV, radio, records, as well as computers and directed activities related to texts, and regular books and courses, with classes even available through radio and TV.

In the United Kingdom, the results of this learning have been very positive, with 60% lower costs. The main advantages of distance education identified at the time which are to some extent still valid today are: 1) quality teaching en masse; 2) distance education's efficiency compared to traditional classes; 3) lower costs; 4) it avoids large concentrations of people and employees; 5) it makes it possible to spread education to rural areas; 6) it reduces migration; 7) it ensures quality education where there are no institutions to offer it (LITTO; FORMIGA, 2008).

It should be emphasized that distance education in Brazil became more robust with the appearance of the University of Brasilia (UnB) in 1979, which adopted the British model by signing an agreement with the United Kingdom's Open University (UKOU), the former University of the Air. However, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) was against this type of teaching, because it believed almost exclusively in traditional methods using a blackboard and chalk. In Brazil at the time, there were difficulties in implementing distance education, basically due to the limitations of the country's telecommunications system and prejudice against it due to an excessive focus on face-to-face education. In addition to this, political and economic factors hindered the adoption of distance education in Brazil, especially the corporatism of public higher education (LITTO; FORMIGA, 2008).

However, beginning in 2003, distance education began to show a solid growth in Brazil, as can be seen by the increase in the number of courses and registrations, with students obtaining better results than students in face-to-face courses. All of this helped diminish society's prejudice against this type of teaching. One of the current problems with distance education is related to teaching materials and the negative influence of governmental education policy which tries to misrepresent the characteristics of distance education and obliges students to be physically present in a classroom (LITTO; FORMIGA, 2008).

To Moran (2002) and Santinello (2007), distance education is a type of education based on self-motivated learning, where students and professors are separated by space and/or time. According to Moore (2007, p. 2), it is

> planned learning that occurs normally in a different place from the teaching location, which requires special techniques to create the course

> instructions, and communication is achieved through the use of various types of technology and special organizational and administrative devices.

Distance education values the rhythm that is most efficient for the student, giving him or her autonomy in the learning process. According to the United States' National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (Ipeds), distance learning is

> Education that uses one or more forms of technology to offer instruction to students who are in locations separate from the instructor and to support regular and substantial interaction between the students and the instructor in a synchronous or asynchronous fashion. The technologies used for instruction may include: the internet, unidirectional or bidirectional transmissions through open transmissions; closed circuits; cable; microwave; broadband; fiber-optic, satellite devices or wi-fi communication; audio conferences; and video cassettes, DVDs and CD-ROMS, if cassettes, DVDs and CD-ROMs are used in conjunction with the above listed technologies (ALLEN et al., 2016, p. 41).

Pattol (2013) and Chauí (1980) criticize distance education, because they believe that face-to-face learning cannot be surpassed by communicating using technology, because technology requires a lowering of standards in terms of acquired knowledge. To Zuin (2006), the distance education courses that have been successful have promoted face-to-face contact between professors and students. We should be looking for distance education that not only produces information, but also, according to Belloni (2006), knowledge as a process, grounded in the construction of active and collaborative learning, which also works with new concepts of teaching and learning.

In addition, according to Fielding (2016), we should discard the rhetoric that says distance education is superior to any other form, because it offers autonomy and fits into the schedule of any student. To the author, we need to go beyond this, creating an opportunity for students to document their negotiation in terms of the space and time that the course will occupy in their lives in terms of their courses and groups. This way students will feel more connected to other students and the course *per se*, which will help the student understand that time crises are part of a broader social condition. This will lead to a discussion of when courses will be held and what part they will play in each student's life.

According to Silva and Campos (2016); Formiga and Marcos (2004); Litto and Formiga (2008) and Silva and Behr (2016), distance education can be divided

into three generations according to the growth of new means of communication: 1st generation – teaching by correspondence; 2nd generation – teaching by computer and printed media related to tele-education; and 3rd generation – virtual or e-learning. What these generations have in common is a lack of space-time limits. There are authors such as Silva (2012) and Moore and Kearsley (2007) who divide distance education into five generations: 1st generation – correspondence; 2nd generation – Radio and TV; 3rd generation – Open University; 4th generation – teleconferences; and 5th generation – the internet.

According to Tallent-Runnels (2006) there are three models of education: 1) online education – a course of study conducted entirely through the internet; 2) traditional education (face-to-face) – a course of study conducted entirely in-person and 3) hybrid education – a course of study partially conducted in-person and partially through the internet. According to the MEC there are two types of study recognized in Brazil: in-person and distance. However, courses of study classified as in-person are permitted to have disciplines that are up to 25% online (BRASIL, 2016a; BRASIL, 2016b). This division is similar to the classification in the United States, where online courses of study can be: 1) totally online – when 80% to 100% of the content is online; 2) web aided – when 1% to 29% of the content is online and 3) a hybrid – with 30% to 79% online content (GRABER; CHODZKO-ZAJKO, 2014).

Oliveira (2009) states that the hybrid model is ideal, because: 1) it substitutes lectures with online interactive material; 2) it uses taped video lectures available for viewing through video streaming; 3) it has discussion forums; 4) it offers online monitoring of students; 5) it supports virtual collaborative projects; and 6) it offers resources for technological support. This combines well with the hybrid flexibility advocated by Pimenta and Lopes (2014), which states that because knowledge is social, it has to strengthen real social relations and this can only be done through face-to-face encounters.

However, according to He et al. (2014) the efficiency results for the different delivery methods used in the same course of study sometimes yield contradictory conclusions. Even though the results were similar to or sometimes superior to results for traditional teaching, American students expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of social interaction.

Furthermore, according to Oliveira (2009), the main advantages of distance education are that it reaches a greater portion of the population, and its flexibility of methods and materials helps those with little time. The disadvantages are a reduction in the exchange of experiences between students and professors and between students, and the lack of an effective network of contacts. These disadvantages

are being minimized by technology which is broadening the teaching possibilities, redefining the class dynamics and creating new ties between its participants. The appropriate use of technology in teaching activities could make these ties much firmer than the interactions that occur in face-to-face classes (OLIVEIRA, 2009).

However, there are still some obstacles that need to be overcome to effectively disseminate distance education in Brazil, which according to ABED (2015) are: 1) students abandoning courses of study before their completion; 2) organizational challenges for traditional organizations that begin to offer distance education; 3) production costs and 4) resistance to distance education on the part of students and professors. Teperino (2006) has already stated that the challenges and obstacles for implementing distance education are based on overcoming the models and routines of in-person education. The main challenges would be: 1) psycho-social-cultural in nature, related to breaking paradigms and reconstructing teaching and learning methods; 2) operational – related to methodological, technological, and legal aspects as well as the formation of technical and logistics teams; and 3) public organizations which are very traditional and bureaucratic.

From the perspective of Chinese students, according to Wang (2013), the barriers to online learning are: 1) communication and interaction; 2) teaching and courses; 3) learning resources; 4) learning support services; 5) external support and economic burdens; 6) IT and network knowledge; and 7) access to the internet. The communication and interaction barriers are viewed as most relevant which jibes with the American view mapped out by He et al. (2014).

Corrêa and Santos (2009) identify the existence of prejudice and a negative attitude towards distance education in academia, characterizing it with words like "charlatan" and "incomplete." This occurs even in a context in which, based on bibliometric studies of education, there is little difference between the students' impressions of quality and satisfaction in distance education as opposed to in-person education (MILL; OLIVEIRA, 2014). According to Silva (2012), the historic discriminatory and prejudiced view of distance education, based on the inappropriate methods used in the past, is no longer a reality. Interactions between students through the internet offer collaborative learning with the construction of knowledge.

Litto and Formiga (2008) affirm that distance education suffered from prejudice for a number of reasons, but with the passage of time and various initiatives mainly on the part of the government, the situation gradually improved and this culminated with the founding of the Open University of Brasilia. Mention should also be made of: 1) the development of public policy; 2) the inclusion of

distance education in laws, guidelines and bases for education; and 3) movements to put an end to the idea that distance education is somehow an inferior method of teaching. To successfully implement distance education in a university, the offerings needs to be centralized with integrated institutional support rather than fragmented offerings based on isolated units or specific disciplines.

In the National Education Plan (PNE) for the period from 2014 to 2024, distance education is contemplated as an alternative to be considered by youths as well as adults for mid-level and high-level professional education. In this way, it can be seen that there has been a gradual decline in prejudice on the part of the government and society in regard to distance education, and they have played an important role in the consolidation of this form of teaching. In fact, according to Silva et al. (2016) the Ministry of Education reinforces this equal treatment of in-person and distance education by giving their diplomas the same validity.

The issue of abandoning distance education studies is a point of concern for the institutions that offer these types of course and requires greater attention from managers, given that the reasons for this behavior are still unclear (BITTENCOURT; MERCADO, 2014). Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014) agree that a serious analysis needs to be done about why students abandon online studies, and that this needs to be a central point in studies of distance education. They add that students who abandon their studies affect other students and produce a negative effect rather like an invisible elephant in the classroom. Therefore, academia needs to prioritize student retention.

Woodley and Simpson (2014) further state that there needs to be a study of why so little is done to stop students from abandoning their studies and offer the following suggestions to reduce this behavior: 1) To make the student registration process rigorous and transparent in terms of what is expected of the student during the program and 2) To make the exit process more difficult, and not simply leave the institution with no answers.According to Corrêa and Santos (2009) distance education needs to evolve to overcome obstacles and prejudice. They believe that in order for this to happen, questions related to management, the use of technology and the education of area professionals need to be rethought.

2.3 Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as applied to Distance Education

To Castells (2003), our information society demands a digital culture (SANTAELLA, 2003), where ICTs create a new form of seeing and perceiving facts, a new way of relating.

The evolution of ICTs has revolutionized the ways in which we teach and learn. Distance education, with the use of ICTs, has made it necessary to rethink our pedagogic model, the role of the professor, and our traditional evaluation methodologies (MELLO, 2011). Knowing how individuals manage information and ICTs, or information processing tools, is fundamental to this area's development. Castells (2003) alleges that the information society signifies a new stage of development, based on our capacity to produce and utilize information. From the educational point of view, according to Christensen et al. (2009), the computer has emerged as a disruptive factor in terms of traditional teaching, which creates opportunities to handle all the new demands of students, with their different strengths and different styles of learning. Valente (1993) and Neitzel (2001) go further, affirming that technology is acting as a catalyst in the process of changing our educational paradigm, in which the student assumes control of the learning process and becomes responsible for the construction of knowledge. Virtual environments make new methods of constructing knowledge possible, thereby creating a new methodological form of teaching, based on technology (RODRIGUES JÚNIOR; FERNANDES, 2014).

However, Baptista (2014) alerts us that one of the weaknesses of using IT in distance education is the fact that Brazil is a poor country, where many people don't have computers and there are many who do not have access to appropriate IT infrastructure. They also mention the quality of internet connections which frequently compromise the quality of good distance education courses.

3 The Theory of Social Representation (SRT)

To identify how Brazilians view distance education we have decided to use the theoretical methodology of Social Representation Theory (SRT). SRT was originally used for psychological studies and has since been applied to various other areas concerned with cognition, including business, crossing disciplinary boundaries in the process (ABDALLA; ROCHA, 2010; ARRUDA, 2002; VERGARA; FERREIRA, 2006). It first appeared in 1950 and was developed based on the study *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Public* integrating phenomena related to individual and social perceptions (MOSCOVICI, 1961; VALLE et al., 2014).

According to Jodelet (2001) and Alves-Mazzotti (2009), social representation is important, because it seeks to understand social imagination about the thoughts and actions of people in regard to a given object. According to Alves-Mazzotti (2009, p. 60), social representation: "investigates exactly how the systems of reference that we use are formed and function in terms of classifying people and groups and interpreting everyday events".

Social representation gives an object meaning which is structured by people in the process of understanding and transforming a reality which is constantly changing and is structured mentally by people within the context of their relationships. Social representation interprets people's reality in a non-rational form, regulating the relationship between these people and their environment, which has a greater influence on their practices than intellectual debates or concrete information (VALLE et al., 2014).

Sá (2002) states that the process of identifying the object being investigated in terms of social representation is of utmost importance. This object may be a person, a theory, an idea, a concept, a material, or in other words anything that can be represented socially, as long as the social representation corresponds to a relationship between the person and the object being investigated, which is expressed by a thought (JODELET, 2001).

Social representation is dynamic and evolves, but it can be captured at any moment like a photograph and can be identified and represented (PECORA et al., 2012).

Social representation is structured around a central nucleus which is surrounded by a peripheral system (ABRIC, 2003). According to Vergara and Ferreira (2005) the central nucleus is the most important part of social representation, because it reflects the most solid perceptions of the group being studied. The central nucleus generates, organizes and stabilizes the social representation, representing what is immutable and, in this way, what is decisive in giving the meaning that a certain object has for a group (PECORA et al., 2012; VERGARA; FERREIRA, 2005).

SRT also identifies the existence of a peripheral, more flexible system, which revolves around the central nucleus and accommodates the immediate contextual contradictions of the group being studied, which is not consensual but flexible, which makes it possible to adapt social representation to the current situation, preserving the immutable central nucleus (MAZZOTTI, 2001; VERGARA; FERREIRA, 2005).

Free association, which will be covered in the section related to the analysis of the data, is the method we used to identify the central nucleus and the peripheral system of a social representation (ABRIC, 2003). This nucleus is formed by the words which are most often associated with the subject and which have the greatest importance to the study's participants. Greater attention was paid to the central nucleus of this social representation in order to obtain the opinion of the participants in regard to this important form of education/teaching.

4 Methodology

This article follows the principles of exploratory qualitative and quantitative research (VERGARA, 2013). The data were collected through a link in which the respondents expressed the five words that come to mind when they hear "distance education." This is known as free association.

In terms of the type of sample used, we used a sample by accessibility or convenience. In other words, those interviewed were selected without any statistical procedure, but simply according to our ease of access to them (VERGARA, 2013). We used Sphinx software as a data collection and analysis tool. The research was conducted over a 23 day period during April and May 2015. To define the social representation of distance education, we used the "four-house chart", data evaluation technique created by Pierre Vergès, which is made up of the elements of the social representation's central nucleus and peripheral system (VERGARA; FERREIRA, 2005). This "four-house chart" construction was obtained through the use of EVOC software.

EVOC considers the average frequency and order of the association or evocation of words, which are referred to respectively as FME and OME, constructing a chart that identifies the words that make up the central nucleus and the peripheral system (ABRIC, 2003).

The current study focuses on the words that make up the central nucleus, since these are the words that best represent the thinking of the Brazilian population in respect to distance education. In fact, within the central nucleus are the expressions that are most intrinsically associated with the social representation of the construct being studied (VALLE et al., 2014). It should be emphasized that, according to Kalache's approach (KALACHE et al., 1987) the raw data need to be cleaned in order to identify similar words. In this manner, the words were adjusted to improve the analysis performed by the EVOC software. For example, the words facile or easy were transformed into facility, and so on and so forth.

In conclusion, to correctly identify the significance of each of the words encountered in the distance education central nucleus of social representation, we used the responses to two open questions from the questionnaire: 1) which of the cited words is most important? and 2) please describe in your own words what distance education is. In this way, all of the responses to the questions above were analyzed in terms of content in the cases in which the interviewee had previously evoked one of the words from the central nucleus. More emphasis was placed on the responses to the first question, because it portrays explicitly what

the interviewee thinks about the given central nucleus word. Content analysis is a deductive or inferential process, developed based on words or indicators (FREITAS; JANISSEK, 2000), which for this article, are the words that make up the distance education central nucleus.

The online questionnaire was distributed to various contacts of the authors, by email or social networks, with the only requirement being that they were Brazilian. One hundred responses were obtained, and ninety-nine were used, because one of the participants chose to annul the given responses. According to Moscarola (1990), research using at least 100 responses has a consistently higher rate of success. Thus, in this manner, the questionnaire was made available for 23 days during the months of April and May 2015 until the number of 100 respondents was attained, independent of their course of study.

The sample displayed the following profile: 1) 44.4% were female, 55.6% male; 2) 91.0% were between the ages of 25 and 55 with the largest individual age group being between 36 and 45 years of age (37.0%); 3) 91.0% reside in the Southeast; 4) there was a preponderance of participants who were engineers (36.0%); 5) 81.0% had at least taken post-graduate classes (for specialization and refinement), with 34.0% having a Master's degree; and 6) 63.0% of those interviewed had participated in some form of distance education, with 23.8% having taken post-graduate courses (for specialization and refinement).

Once the words that identify the distance education central nucleus of social representation were identified along with their respective significance, according to the content analysis, we searched the theoretical references used in this article for authors who corroborated this study's results as a form of academic validation for our results. Finally, our aim was to elaborate a definition of what distance education is, based on distance education's social representation, as well as what the study's social group thinks of this form of education.

5 Results analysis

Through an analysis of the collected data using the EVOC software, we identified the following words as part of the distance education central nucleus of social representation: Flexibility, Facility, Practicality, Discipline, Time, Inexpensive, Cost, Opportunity, Internet and Convenience.

The word Flexibility suggests that distance education is the most appropriate form of education to overcome the barriers imposed by the in-person model of teaching.

Distance education is more flexible, since courses do not have preset times and are done when the student has time in a location that is remote from and independent from any predetermined physical location. The fact that it is flexible facilitates the student's planning for completing coursework within the given timeframes, which are usually shorter than with in-person education. Litto and Formiga (2008) have already affirmed that distance education respects the student's learning rhythm and autonomy. However, there are reservations in terms of the absence of in-person encounters, whether they are for evaluation or to stimulate the interaction between students and between the professor and the students. Belloni (1999) and Oliveira (2009) have also warned that this is one of the disadvantages of distance education that could lead to a greater proportion of students abandoning their courses of study.

The following are some of the positive responses in terms of distance education from the study's participants:

> Because the greatest advantage of distance education is that you can study at a more convenient time in any location (Respondent 95).

> Because for me distance education means I can complete the training/course from wherever I am. The time to get to the course location, the cost of getting there, and the time the course is given can sometimes become impediments (Respondent 56).

The word Facility, however, has positive and negative connotations. The negative connotation refers to the feeling that distance education courses are inferior from the point of view of how demanding they are and the quality of their content. Corrêa and s Santos (2009) as well as Litto and Formiga (2008) have already stated that distance learning has suffered from prejudice over time. In terms of the positive connotation, distance learning is described as being easier to do, because it can be done when the student has time available in the comfort of home. Distance education also facilitates access to a good education for those who live far from large cities. This is what Oliveira (2009) argues, saying that distance education can reach a larger number of students.

Here are a few negative quotes in terms of distance education from the study's participants:

> Because distance education allows you to study according to your availability (Respondent 52).

> *Because it indicates that the learning will not be exactly close to the ideal* (Respondent 94).

Now the word Practicality represents practical, agile, and as planned, with the student being able to take the course without leaving home when time is scarce. There are reservations, however, in regard to the quality of the material, of the means of communication and the tutors, who have to adjust to distance education. This is what Oliveira (2009) describes as one of the advantages of distance education, the flexibility of the appropriate teaching methods and materials as well as the chance to have online tutoring.

Here are some of examples of quotes from respondents:

> Because these days we're so busy, there's so much to be done.... Studying at home is more practical... (Respondent 11).

> Because in the past it was difficult to imagine that today we'd be able to study as planned, and this has become a practice that's so practical, agile and so dynamic that it's easier to succeed, and this learning process ends up being a victory for one's professional career (Respondent 24).

The word Discipline describes one of the behavioral characteristics that the student needs to have or acquire in order to be able to learn through distance education, and it encompasses personal organization and planning. This fits in with what Moran (2002) and Santinello (2007) argue, given that they consider distance education to be a self-learning process. Valente (1993) and Neitzel (2001) echo this understanding, because it is the student that controls the learning process, being responsible for the construction of his or her own knowledge.

Here are some examples of quotes from respondents:

> To succeed in distance education the person must have discipline to complete the study routines without the stimulus of having fellow students present (Respondent 7).

> Distance studying requires us to have discipline in reserving the time needed to complete the course's activities (Respondent 73).

The word Time on the other hand expresses the gains in time that distance education provides, as compared to in-person teaching, since the student does not have to

be physically present in the classroom. There'sThere is a better use of time with distance learning, to the extent that one can avoid intense traffic in large urban centers. The respondents also mentioned the importance of having a professor to answer questions and guide the student towards achieving the course's objectives through some type of interaction, which is what Oliveira (2009) mentions in her study.

Here are some examples of quotes from respondents:

> Because I can maximize my time given that I don't have to go to any learning institution (I live in Duque de Caxias), meaning I don't lose time in traffic, for example (Respondent 46).

> Because (time) is the most important factor for someone who seeks this type of degree (Respondent 90).

Now the word Inexpensive expresses one of the great gains for students in terms of distance education, the chance to take a course with the same quality as an in- person class, but at a lower cost. This is in line with what Litto and Formiga (2008) say about distance education's ability to offer the same quality course for lower cost than traditional courses, which has the effect of making education available to a larger segment of the population. The idea behind the word Cost is the same as Inexpensive, and together they mean that distance education offers a better cost-benefit ratio than face-to-face education.

Here are some examples of quotes by the respondents:

> I believe that online courses and traditional courses are of similar quality, however, online courses are less expensive and can be taken at any time (Respondent 100).

The word Opportunity associates distance education with the creation of opportunities for students who have difficulties in taking courses, whether it is because of a lack of time, difficulties in getting to courses, or limited financial conditions that make them unable to pay high costs. Litto and Formiga (2008) have already discussed the transformational power of distance education in its making education available to a larger part of the population, which thus makes it a tool of social inclusion.

Here are examples of quotes from the respondents:

> This is the dimension of distance education that offers the greatest value. It facilitates continuing education, especially for individuals who

> aren't able to access given courses in a face-to-face manner. This is why it's an opportune and valuable medium that enables us to achieve that long desired wish for a more just country, which is only possible through the availability of more education for all (Respondent 63).
>
> It allows someone who has trouble in terms of transport or logistics to improve their education (Respondent 88).

The word Internet is perceived as a fundamental resource for the existence of distance education, functioning as a medium or infrastructure for the providing of courses, because without it, most of the distance education courses available today could not exist. It is also related to the platforms and systems involved in the storing of content. This underlines the argument of Mello (2011) who states that the appearance of the internet has created a new society based on learning and knowledge. However, at the same time, there are criticisms of the precariousness of the internet's infrastructure, because it is not available to the entire population and ends up not realizing the full potential of this form of education. Batista (2014) views this as one of the weaknesses of IT in distance education, because Brazil is a poor country in which a large part of the population does not have a computer and also has to deal with precarious infrastructure.

Here are some examples of quotes by the respondents:

> The access and usage infrastructure of the internet is weak in our country, which makes media and ways of distance teaching more limited than they could be, or on a level not much different than face-to-face education (Respondent 93).
>
> Because (the internet) is the main vehicle that makes distance education possible (Respondent 14).

Finally, the word Convenience gives us a sense of the substantial reduction in the difficulties of a student's routine which is provided by distance education. For the context of this article, the word Convenience is similar to the words Practicality, Flexibility and Facility, or in other words, these words have similar meanings.

Here are some examples of quotes from respondents:

> Because it defines the possibility of learning without major disruptions in one's routine (Respondent 15).

In order to offer a greater discussion of the confrontation involved in the analysis of the terms of the distance education central nucleus and to inform our conclusion, we also analyzed the responses in which a negative word was deemed the most important of the five most mentioned words. A minority of the respondents hold the view that distance education is bad, tiring, inefficient, precarious, horrible and of inferior quality when compared to in-person education. Some mention distance education students as being worse than those of in-person courses. However, since the great majority expressed a positive and respectful view of distance education, which is reflected by the words that make up the distance education central nucleus of social representation, an analysis of the respondents who expressed a negative view may open new possibilities of how we envision the social representation of distance education.

Here are examples of negative quotes from respondents:

> Skepticism, is this course effective? (Respondent 3).

> Unqualified, because most of these courses, unfortunately, are taken by people who are only looking to have another line on their resume, and are not exactly concerned with learning or being a good professional (Respondent 26).

6 Conclusions and recommendations

In general, we conclude that most Brazilians view distance education positively, but have reservations and premises that need to be followed. Most of the comments and words evoked have positive connotations, such as flexibility, facility, convenience, and practicality for the student in taking courses, with savings in terms of time and cost. It is also interesting to note that the respondents believe that distance education creates opportunities for those who are already in the market and want to refine their knowledge, as well as for those who face barriers to in-person study, as long as they are disciplined. And as could be expected, the respondents also related distance education with technology, more specifically the internet, which is the link between the student and the professor in most distance education courses.

It is interesting to note as well that the responses of some of the participants reveal a more negative view of distance education. It should be emphasized that this is a minority in terms of the data collected, but in any event they provide

interesting viewpoints that may be interpreted as reservations in regard to the majority's positive view.

We conclude by noting that the reservations in terms of the positive view of distance education are based on the perception that it is weak, of dubious quality, has easier material than in-person courses and that distance courses are not as efficient. Many of these negative aspects in terms of distance education stem from the lack of interaction between the professor and the student, its supposedly weak and undemanding content, the supposed loss in learning due to its tiring and unstimulating nature, and even the market's low opinion of the those who opt for this kind of course.

We also conclude that despite the positive view that Brazilians have of distance education, some premises need to be followed for this method of teaching to be effective: 1) it needs to mix distance education with in-person encounters; 2) the professors need to be sufficiently capable and they cannot omit student interaction with the professor and with other students; and 3) the material needs to be appropriate for this type of learning as do the methods of communication and the technologies utilized.

Based on the evidence presented, we conclude that the hybrid model seems to be the most in keeping with the Brazilian view of distance education, even for those Brazilians who are unaware of the existence of this type of distance education. Oliveira (2009) corroborates this argument when she states that the hybrid model is the most appropriate because it preserves some in-person meetings which make it possible for students to relate and socialize in person, which are important dimensions for humanization. This is what Zuin (2006) wanted to say when he stated that the distance education courses that have been most successful have been those that bring together the professor and the student, making interaction possible through technology.

Considering the elements of the distance education central nucleus for social representation, we have been able to develop a new definition of distance education from the Brazilian point of view.

Distance education is a flexible, practical, easy and convenient model of teaching for the student, because it is conducted remotely during available hours causing minimal disruption of student routines and offers education that is more time-efficient than in-person teaching. It uses the internet as a means of communication as well as technological platforms for the transmission of content, but the importance

of some type of in-person interaction between the professor and the student should always be remembered. The costs of this type of teaching are lower than the in-person model. Distance education creates opportunities for those students who are unable to take in-person courses, which makes these courses valuable and socially inclusive. Finally, distance education requires discipline on the part of the student, who needs to organize time well and to be a good self-learner to effectively fulfill course objectives. In addition, professors need to be capable, and the material must be of high quality and compatible with this form of education.

From a management point of view, managers of teaching institutions can examine these social representation results to see how distance education is viewed by Brazilians and adapt to this perception, promoting adjustments in the way courses are offered and given.

From an academic perspective, this discussion based on social representation raises old dilemmas in regard to distance education, and makes it possible to compare what academia believes distance education to be in terms of a proper education methodology, and what Brazilians believe it is in practice.

This study has some limitations that need to be noted. One important limitation is the lack of a centrality test, because according to Vergara (2013), this helps in the structuring of the central nucleus terms. In addition to this, the fact that almost all the study participants were from the Southeast, with a high proportion coming from an engineering background, means that a broader sample in terms of profiles would be of interest.

In terms of suggestions for further research, the words that do not make up part of the central nucleus need to be better explained, because even though they are distant from the central nucleus, they connote more flexible and negotiable aspects of social representation in terms of distance education, based on the subject's context.

In this manner, this analysis together with the central nucleus and peripheral system results may reveal trends and perceptions which have not turned up in our word analysis of the central nucleus.

A representação social da educação a distância sob o olhar dos brasileiros

Resumo

Este trabalho quali-quantitativo, exploratório e de campo baseia-se na análise dos dados obtidos, a partir da aplicação do teste de evocação de palavras, com um total de 100 respondentes, de forma a se construir a representação social da EaD sob o ponto de vista dos brasileiros. Adotou-se como técnica de tratamento de dados a técnica do "quadro de quatro casas" de Pierre Vergès. Fazendo-se uso de conceitos teóricos sobre EaD, a representação social da EaD será comparada a essa teoria, a fim de se validar conhecimento e identificar lacunas do saber. Identificou-se que a composição do núcleo central da representação social da EaD é composta pelas seguintes palavras: Flexibilidade, Facilidade, Praticidade, Disciplina, Tempo, Barato, Custo, Oportunidade, Internet e Comodidade. A principal conclusão é que, apesar da visão positiva sobre a EaD, algumas premissas precisam ser seguidas para que essa modalidade de educação seja efetiva: 1) necessidade de se mesclar a EaD com encontros presenciais; 2) necessidade dos cursos baseados na EaD possuir professores capacitados, que não abram mão da interação entre os alunos e entre o aluno e o próprio professor e 3) o material precisa ser adequado para essa modalidade de educação, assim como os meios de comunicação e tecnologias utilizadas.

Palavras-chave: *Ensino. Educação. EaD. Representação social.*

Representación social de la educación a distancia desde el punto de vista de los brasileros

Resumen

Este trabajo cuali-cuantitativo, exploratorio y de campo se basa en el análisis de datos obtenidos a partir de la aplicación de pruebas de emisión de palabras, con un total de 100 encuestados, para construir una representación social de la EaD desde el punto de vista de los brasileros. Se adoptó como técnica de tratamiento de los datos, la técnica del "cuadro de cuatro casas" de Pierre Vergès. Haciéndose uso de conceptos teóricos sobre EaD, la representación social de la EaD será comparada con esta teoría, con el fin de evaluar el conocimiento e identificar lagunas del saber. Se identificó que la composición del núcleo central de la representación social de la EaD está compuesta por las siguientes palabras: Flexibilidad, Facilidad, Práctica, Disciplina, Tiempo, Barato, Costo, Oportunidad, Internet y Comodidad. La principal conclusión es que, a pesar de la visión positiva sobre la EaD, algunas prioridades precisan ser seguidas para que esta modalidad de educación sea efectiva: 1) necesidad de mezclar la EaD con encuentros presenciales; 2) necesidad de cursos basados en la EaD contando con profesores capacitados que no dejen de lado la interacción entre los alumnos y entre el profesor y los alumnos, y 3) necesidade de que el material sea adecuado para esta modalidad de educación, así como los medios de comunicación y tecnologías utilizadas.

Palabras clave: *Enseñanza. Educación. EaD. Representación social.*

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