

The institutionalization of distance education as research, criticism and productivity

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Abstract: The objective of this essay is to build a theoretical-analytical framework that gather our contributions to the analysis of the process of institutionalization of public Distance Education (DE) in Brazil, establishing an analysis of the object as research, criticism and productivity. Through this, we present an original definition, highlighting levels and gradations, as well as the dialectical device that is at the center of the movements that make up the phenomenon.

Keywords: Institutionalization; Distance Education; Criticism.

A institucionalização da educação a distância como pesquisa, crítica e produtividade

Resumo: O objetivo deste ensaio é construir um referencial teórico-analítico que consubstancia nossas contribuições para a análise do processo de institucionalização da Educação a Distância (EaD) pública no Brasil, estabelecendo uma análise do objeto como pesquisa, crítica e produtividade. Por meio disso, apresentamos definição original, evidenciando níveis e gradações, bem como o dispositivo dialético que está no cerne dos movimentos que compõem o fenômeno.

Palavras-chave: Institucionalização; Educação a Distância; Crítica.

La institucionalización de la educación a distancia como investigación, crítica y productividad



Resumen: El objetivo de este ensayo es construir un marco teórico-analítico que recolecta nuestras contribuciones al análisis del proceso de institucionalización de la Educación a Distancia pública (EaD) en Brasil, estableciendo un análisis del objeto como investigación, crítica y productividad. A través de esto, presentamos una definición original, destacando niveles y gradaciones, así como el dispositivo dialéctico que está en el centro de los movimientos que componen el fenómeno.

Palabras clave: Institucionalización; Educación a distancia; Crítica.

1 INTRODUCTION

The institutionalization of Distance Education (EaD) in Brazil - and especially in higher education - has been the subject of criticism, research, and productivity¹ and has acquired particular prominence in the last two years due to experiences with the various forms of Emergency Remote Learning (ERE) that were part of the contingencies of the Covid-19 Pandemic (MILL; OLIVEIRA; FERREIRA, 2022; FERREIRA et al., 2022). Despite the distinctions made between EaD and ERE - to which we present some reservations in Veloso and Mill (2022a) - it is certain that the social isolation and the need to return to activities remotely put us to think and discuss the future and the role of EaD courses, in its projected evolution and that endorsed by the post-pandemic period. With marked relevance for higher education institutions that, by default, are historically used to the exclusive offer of face-to-face courses, the intricate phenomenon of the incorporation of EaD into the institutional routine becomes urgent to ensure continuity and, consequently, quality for the proposals undertaken in this modality.

As researchers who, for some years now, have been working on the topic, we believe it is of fundamental importance to discuss it in the light of our recent theoretical and scientific production,

¹ It is worth noting that the idea of productivity in this essay is consistent with the one adopted by Foucault in several of his writings - especially those dealing with the discursive and disciplinary perspective, but emphatically in Foucault (1974; 1985; 1987; 1988; 1990a; 1990b; 1990c; 1993; 1994; 1995; 2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2012). In these texts, the author conceives productivity not only as negativity, in the deleterious sense that this may have, in the very Marxist sense of contradiction, determination, and superstructure, but also positivity, in the postmodern sense of critique and transformation; that is, as an ascendancy of disciplinary power imbued with prototyping individuals and their relations (human, social, cultural, technical and technological, behavioral, discursive, dispositional - and thus strategically of value, intellectual, and ethical). This idea, here taken, in particular, by the notion of academic and/or scientific productivity, is made explicit in its link to the constitution of an individual reproducer (conscious or not) of the economic forces and other strategic relations of value production that permeate the society to which it belongs to. It is, therefore, an inertial power of explicit exposure of the pretension (volitional or not) to constitute socially docile and economically productive bodies that are increasingly capable of sustaining the economic forces and the devices incident on the bodies that support the respective society in its typical time and that trigger degree of freedom for criticism and (micro)transformation. Productivity, in this sense, is not just a distant object of refutation and denial, but a strategic relation (therefore, a device) of the use of material conditions (discursive - therefore, political, cultural, economic, academic, intellectual, and so on.) capable of producing effect and being produced by immanent social practices. It can't be inferred that this relation is not, by origin and effects, sophisticated, insidious, molecular, individual, source, and consequence of the relationship of sense production in a field of determinations (or in a particular order of discourse). Productivity is the capitalist mediator (because it is imbricated in the over-generation of values into surplus value and the expropriation of identities). The concept, though it is not at all simple, is a categorical of very high reflexive and explanatory power, as we seek to access. In-depth discussions can be found in Ferreira (2018).

delimiting it to define the field and the investigations that are part of it. More than that, we consider it essential to problematize the theme, especially because analytical perspectives that focus on experiences in public institutions have been coagulated based on views that take - often exclusively - the Open University System of Brazil (UAB) as the principal reference and object of investigation. It is the most important public policy to induce EaD in the country, making it a central point in the debates in the area. However, our research (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015; FERREIRA; COSTA; MILL, 2021; FERREIRA; NASCIMENTO; MILL, 2018; VELOSO, 2022; VELOSO; MILL, 2022b) has shown that the UAB System itself is responsible for engendering contradictions that, if on the one hand, move the process, on the other, should lead it to overcome a hardened vision that, even today, has difficulties to glimpse alternative and viable models for EaD and its institutionalization².

That being said, we emphasize that the main objective of this study is to build a theoretical-analytical framework that substantiates our contributions to the analysis of the institutionalization process of public EaD in Brazil, establishing an analysis of the object as research, criticism, and productivity. Although this text is a theoretical essay, the reflections we present are based on other previous empirical studies. In fact, in this study, we delimit public institutions, so it is where our experiences and research come from. However, we are led to believe that the contributions we propose here can also be used to scrutinize the phenomenon in other contexts that may have similarities or analogous elements (e.g., structure, size, culture, and technologies).

2 FOR A DEFINITION OF THE OBJECT OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF EaD AS CRITICISM AND PRODUCTIVITY

In order to demarcate our position in the field and, specify what, for us, defines the object, let us start by the opposite path, that is, let us refute certain hypotheses to define what the institutionalization of EaD is not. Now, it is not only an adaptation or accommodation to an established model, nor is it reduced to a Manichean clash that results in irreconcilable extremities (FERREIRA, 2021; FERREIRA; NASCIMENTO; MILL, 2018; FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015). Institutionalization is also not the product of arbitrary (hierarchical) impositions on organizational

² An appropriate discussion about this, for example, can be found in Nogueira, Ferreira, and Lira (2020), in which, marginally, the debate about evasion in public higher education courses via EaD. These interrelations are far from being undetectable; on the contrary, they are both source and consequence of the processes of institutionalization of public EaD in the typical Brazilian model.

culture. Furthermore, we reject the binary perspective that conceives the phenomenon merely from the qualifiers institutionalized or not institutionalized (FERREIRA; MILL, 2014). The notion of inexorability, from an etapist perspective, should also be avoided since it imposes impertinent determinism on the process.

A wide range of other authors have also been researching institutionalization from multiple perspectives, unrelated to the UAB, articulating meanings that permeate definitions of the phenomenon, linkage with institutional theory, case analysis, and development of protocols with recommendations to educational institutions (ESMAN, 1972; PIÑA, 2009; PERNAMBUCO, 2011; VIEIRA, 2012; MORAIS; NASCIMENTO; REGO, 2015; NASCIMENTO; VIEIRA, 2016; CHAQUIME, 2019; NUNES; SILVA; CAMPOS, 2021). If it is of interest to investigate an even broader spectrum of national and international references that address the topic, we recommend analysis of the discussion contained in Ferreira and Carneiro (2015) and, in particular, the set of references therein, which systematize a broad effort of a systematic review of the field of institutionalization of EaD in Brazil and worldwide.

In this path, we reached by illation the fundamental characteristics that, in our understanding, constitute the process of institutionalization of EaD. It is precisely a continuum that, as such, includes both advances and setbacks, to the extent that no institutional practice, even if crystallized, gets sufficient guarantees of reproduction ad infinitum (VELOSO, 2022). Furthermore, it is related to the idea of conformation (plasticity) of the organization to internal and external contingencies, whether cultural, structural, personal, or technological. It presupposes recognizing, legitimizing, and positioning in a strategic system of power, knowledge, and subjectivity (FERREIRA, 2018; MILL; FERREIRA, M.; FERREIRA, D., 2018). It is a process circumscribed by a historical-social context, influenced by endogenous and exogenous elements. It has to do with the organizational incorporation of innovation models and practices - which highlights the importance of organicity. Being an intrinsically human phenomenon, it involves knowledge exchange and, consequently, the search for consensus and stability in management. By guaranteeing recursion, that is, reproduction capacity, the organically incorporated practices tend to crystallize through formalization and bureaucratization of activities to ensure greater resistance in the face of internal and/or external pressures that shake the institutional order.

Institutionalization, moreover, occurs through sequential processes that are amorphous and gradual, because there is variability in social patterns and behaviors. It occurs, therefore, in phases

over time as a result of factors that interact to create an environment that supports it. It moves from the informal to the formal level as it becomes part of the institutional bureaucratic apparatus and takes shape or, in other words, it crystallizes to provide better guarantees of resistance to shocks to order. For the institutionalization of EaD to happen, three elementary conditions are required: organizational support, standardization of procedures, and incorporation of values and norms associated with an action (facilitated by culture organization).

In addition to that, we emphasize three key elements that must be analyzed to understand the dynamics and the complex movements that permeate the interinstitutional order: subjects - or groups of subjects - organizational culture, and bureaucracy (VELOSO, 2022). The observation of harmony between these institutional components leads to the idea of legitimacy which is related to the capacity of institutional pressure exerted on individuals, especially dissidents, to act in this way and not that way - in line with a certain expectation of reproduction of practices indispensable to recursion. Institutionalization, the process that it is, has to do, therefore, with contexts of intra-organizational disharmony, since the introduction of certain activity and the consequent attempts at organic incorporation imply resistance and shocks in the order (MILL; VELOSO, 2021). In this sense, our definition of the phenomenon also includes the importance of the analysis of the bureaucratic apparatus and the institutional ethos, aiming, depending on the conjuncture, at the strategic provocation of disharmony among the elements (subjects, organizational culture, and bureaucracy). That happens because the cooling off of internal clashes can lead to inertia, preventing, for example, advances considered necessary aiming at organic incorporation and overcoming the dichotomies between modalities.

The aforementioned considerations originate from our recent research, as mentioned, and contribute to the definition of the object we intend to analyze. In our understanding, the institutionalization of EaD is an intricate phenomenon that requires a rigorous approach. Certainly, different approaches tend to give more or less emphasis to certain aspects. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the specificities of what concerns the processes of organic incorporation of EaD within institutions. The efforts undertaken to define the object result, then, in two main perspectives that, in addition to other things, serve as methodological tools to investigate institutionalization. These are propositions already explored by us in other moments (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015; VELOSO, 2022) and that, in our understanding, are neuralgic points for research, criticism, and productivity in the area.

2.1 Dimensions and indicators of institutionalization

In another work (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015), we proposed dimensions and indicators for measuring the stage of institutionalization of EaD. To the extent that the object moves in a continuum, it is observed that the analysis of the process needs to consider different levels or gradations that enable a diagnosis of the phenomenon and, thus, serve as an instrument for strategic action to identify points of delay or major obstacles in the organic incorporation. These indicators, in light of other research (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015; FERREIRA; NASCIMENTO; MILL, 2018), were listed and defined in Ferreira, Costa, and Mill (2021, p. 85-86):

- *Planning*: vision and institutional projection, representation in collegiate bodies, budget, and permanent evaluation as institutional policy;
- - *Organization*: comprehensiveness, recognition and legitimacy of EaD - of its management and in the academic units; quality and sustainability of the model;
- - *Infrastructure*: technological conditions, physical spaces, management systems, EaD model (Instructional Design, production of materials), technical support and team building;
- - *Personal*: formal recognition (workload, progression) and financial incentive (not only through scholarships, as occurs in many programs) - quality of the management, administrative and multidisciplinary teams and quality of pedagogical mediation (teaching and tutoring);
- - *Student support*: in addition to pedagogical support, this includes access to bibliographic resources and bases, participation in collegiate bodies, technical support, accessibility, student assistance (housing, University Restaurant, scholarships for the initiation of teaching and scientific research, as well as scholarships for extension activities). In other words, to guarantee rights that should be obvious and unquestionable, but are not.

Figure 1 below illustrates the intervening relationship between the dimensions and indicators of institutionalization of EaD in public higher education:

Figura 1 – Dimensões e indicadores de institucionalização da EaD



Source: Elaborated by the author (2023).

The dimensions and indicators presented in Ferreira, Costa, and Mill (2021) ratify the centrality of EaD management in light of the institutionalization of the modality since this process implies the gradual implementation of the above aspects. "It is a circuit in which each of the dimensions interrelates with the other, and thus, gives viability and adequacy to the process" (FERREIRA; COSTA; MILL, 2021, p. 86, our translation).

2.2 Institutionalization as a dialectical phenomenon: beyond the UAB model

By agreeing on a definition for the process, it circumscribes forms of analysis that make it possible to interpret the phenomenon as essentially dialectical. If EaD and presence education start to coexist in higher education institutions (particularly at the public ones), and if, as a result of this, intra-institutional clashes begin - for resources, for students, for conflicting visions of reality, and so on. -, for us, there is a dialectical device that can be analyzed scientifically. The different levels or gradations to which we referred earlier provide a diagnosis of the reality of the institutions, unveiling possible paths for the strategic management of EaD that aims to ascend the necessary steps towards the organic incorporation of the modality.





But, for this movement to occur, intra-organizational diatribes are necessary to incite the institutional order to break the inertia. By defining institutionalization previously, we reject the notion of a mere Manichean clash aiming only at the prevalence of this or that modality. However, the diagnosis of reality, which enables us to identify levels or gradations, should not be confused with the analysis of the process in motion. Antagonistic visions not only exist within higher education institutions but are also responsible for the internal struggles that produce advances or setbacks in institutionalization. We return to those elements already mentioned, namely, subjects - or groups of subjects - organizational culture and bureaucracy. The mismatch between them causes struggles in the institution to lead to movements, for example, of changes in the bureaucracy towards a larger crystallization of practices - which has to do with the passage from informal to formal levels. In contrast, certain activity inserted in the institutions, although hardened by being widely inserted in the bureaucratic apparatus, may, depending on endogenous and/or exogenous circumstances, deal with new periods of destabilization of the order, which may result in attempts - successful or not - to extirpate such activities. As a continuum, the organic incorporation of EaD will always be subject to scenarios that attempt, in addition, to exert pressure toward deinstitutionalization.

The dialectical device of the phenomenon, therefore, lies in the contradictions generated by the way in which the subjects perceive the micro and macro structures. These forms, promoted by the current model of the UAB system, generate antagonisms that place EaD and presential education in an apparently irreconcilable friction. It is as if one could not fully exist and develop in the face of the existence and permanence of the other. However, because the process is dialectical, it produces syntheses that can, on the one hand, increasingly incorporate EaD into a given format or model, or, on the other hand, relegating it, for example, to a kind of ghetto that exists, and subsists for the maintenance of EaD courses without greater organic integration into the institution. Elsewhere, we have had the opportunity to define and describe this phenomenon:

[...] we define institutionalization as an essentially dialectical process. Because progress in the incorporation of EaD depends on the initiatives of subjects, whether individual or collective. This means that this process goes through a mobilization in which a spark is created. This spark depends, as we have said, on multivariate and ultimately material and concrete factors. [...] it has an eminently dialectical character: on the one hand, mobilization and effervescence that drive the entry of

EaD; on the other hand, resistance, prejudices, and movements that reject this modality. The debates and contradictions gradually give rise to syntheses. These, in turn, imply both improvements in EaD due to the criticism incorporated, and even the weakening and/or maintenance of "ghettos" that depend solely on external



funding, surviving on behalf of the sectors involved and dependent on the modality. It is therefore a human process. It depends both on the material reality and on the interpretation that the subjects make of it. Certain scenarios and strategies tend to contribute to this. But legitimacy, being recursive, must be constantly renewed, since EaD must be reproduced as an institutional and legitimate practice. Because neither the material and concrete reality, nor the incorporation of the modality into the bureaucratic apparatus - such as its inclusion in the budget matrix - can by themselves guarantee legitimacy *ad infinitum*. Nor can they inexorably determine the progress of this process. Thus, it is reiterated that institutionalization is a dialectical phenomenon constituted by individuals, involving all the vicissitudes of what is intrinsically human (VELOSO; MILL, 2022a, p. 17, our translation).

The dialectical understanding we propose for the phenomenon allows us to say that the dichotomies, driven by contradictions, do not represent insurmountable obstacles; nor does the contradiction prove untruths in the Aristotelian sense (SADER, 2007). On the contrary, by producing syntheses, the clashes reveal a possible overcoming of antagonisms, in which the organic incorporation progressively represents hybridized scenarios. It is precisely for this reason that, on another occasion, we proposed the concept of hybrid education as an explanation for the greater synthesis of the institutionalization process, which tends to generate scenarios in which EaD and presential education are no longer incompatible but become imbricated (VELOSO; MILL, 2022a; VELOSO; MILL; MOREIRA, 2022).

If we defend the phenomenon as essentially dialectical, we also affirm that effective organic incorporation necessarily involves overcoming the model imposed by the UAB system, producer, and perpetrator of contradictions. This does not mean rejecting this public policy, because in most higher education institutions there were no material conditions for the existence - and there would not even be for the continuity - of DE without external support. However, the UAB introduced a certain vision and a way of grasping the reality that led to what we once called the institutionalization of precariousness. That is, the subjects were introjected with a vision that the current order of things works adequately (or, at the limit, as the limit of possibility), cooling the institutional clashes that are the engine of the intended institutionalization. In this way, inertia is produced, and the current model is maintained, which, when analyzed according to the levels and gradations presented in the previous section, reveals significant delays in organic incorporation, such as: the non-incorporation of resources in the budget matrix, the teaching effort not inserted in the institutional bureaucratic apparatus, the precarious tutoring model and not linked to the university, the teaching supported by scholarships, and more (FERREIRA; CARNEIRO, 2015; FERREIRA; NASCIMENTO; MILL, 2018; GOULART; SILVA; FERREIRA, 2020; VELOSO, 2022).

Therefore, overcoming the UAB system, as a probable major outcome of dialectical clashes,

does not mean opposing this policy or disregarding its fundamental contribution to Brazilian EaD. Nor does it mean creating an aversion to EaD models supported by external funding, for example, depending on the needs of each project. Overcoming the UAB means, above all, freeing the modality from this format. Reinforcing the phenomenological approach that we have proposed (VELOSO, 2022), the overcoming of the current policy of external funding implies a greater understanding of reality by the subjects. To understand the possibility of multifaceted proposals of EaD, adapted to the specificities of each institution, beyond the UAB model. We also need to understand the mere antagonistic appearance between the modalities, to highlight the hybridization as a historical trend that already shows itself in the present (VELOSO; MILL; MOREIRA, 2022).

Finally, the provocation we make by considering the overcoming of the UAB as a *sine qua non* condition for institutionalization means that this model moves the process by producing contradictions. This will materialize in such a way that this movement has the power to lead to syntheses that can either move forward or backward in an analysis based on the levels or gradations of the process. In any case, the organic incorporation is understood in terms of an institutional configuration capable of offering greater resistance to the EaD in the face of the shocks to the order that always occur; it is also perceived as overcoming dichotomies towards a deeper understanding of hybridized scenarios, which would imply precisely the overcoming of the UAB model itself.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In these pages, we have substantiated recent productions on the institutionalization of EaD. Our goal was to build a theoretical-analytical framework that brings together our contributions to the analysis of the object as research, critique, and productivity. We believe that the discussion now proposed demarcates our position and suggests ways to scrutinize the phenomenon in other investigations that repeat it.

Therefore, we began with an effort to define the object, building an amalgam of other recent discussions. Then we presented our discussion related to the levels and gradations that allow a diagnosis of institutionalization, constituting an important tool not only for analysis, but also for strategic management aimed at advancing in the organic incorporation of the distance learning modality. Finally, we have demonstrated the dialectical device that is at the core of the movements that make up the phenomenon. We have shown that the contradictions generated and maintained by the UAB system produce syntheses that tend to flow towards more hybrid scenarios, that is, to

overcome the dichotomies between modalities. Now, these are scenarios that allow us to glimpse even the overcoming of the UAB model itself.

The focus of this text, as an essay, has been to synthesize and structure our contributions. However, it is important to emphasize that our definition of the object is based on other research, especially that derived from institutional theory. Moreover, when we define our position, we define our approach without ignoring many other perspectives that complement ours in understanding and studying the institutionalization of EaD. Although we reject some views that we consider erroneous, we know that different scientific productions in the field extend or propose approaches that may be valid for the subject. Therefore, we invite researchers not only to make use of our contributions but also to join the effort to understand the complex process that pervades the organic incorporation of EaD.

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