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Digital Learning and Higher Education in Brazil: A Multicultural Analysis

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Abstract

The present paper discusses higher education and the role of digital learning in the Brazilian context. Using a social justice, multicultural perspective, it argues that effective digital learning in higher education is likely to happen when digital curricular contents have been embedded with inclusionary strategies that foster plural students' critical thinking and empowerment. To develop the argument, it firstly discusses the multicultural nature of Brazilian society and the relevance of conceptualizing digital learning and multicultural perspectives in education. It then highlights the higher education system and structure in Brazil, discussing how remote digital learning has been taking place in that system. It also depicts how digital learning in higher education has been conceived in Brazilian educational policies, both before, and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Brazil, comparative perspectives, digital era, higher education, multiculturalism

Introduction

Digital learning can be defined as a type of learning that takes place using digital technologies It has been at the center of discussions in higher education, both to provide distant learning and to develop advanced digital competence for all jobs and for all learners (Mutka & Redick, 2008). As argued by Ivenicki (2021a, 2021b), it also seems to be central that digital learning is not about technology on its own, but mostly about learning, including the important area of lifelong learning. Authors such as Milana and Nesbit (2015) hold that the process of lifelong learning builds on the idea that personal, social, and professional development and continual learning happen throughout life, higher education being a crucial part of it. As claimed by Slowey and Schuetze (2012), the complexity of the concept of lifelong learning masks a fundamental conflict between, on the one hand a model of lifelong learning derived from principles of social justice and equity and, on the other, a model imbued by market-oriented concerns and informed by a human capital perspective. Such a dual approach can arguably be extended to digital learning in higher education in general, including in Brazil, where privatization of higher education institutions (HEIs) and its use of digital learning has resulted in some private groups' hegemony, and in the demise of faculty. In the latter case, this has resulted huge virtual classes with one or two tutors.

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This paper analyzes higher education and the role of digital learning in the Brazilian context. First it discusses the multicultural nature of Brazilian society and the relevance of conceptualizing digital learning and multicultural perspectives in education. Second, it highlights the higher education system and structure in Brazil, discussing how remote digital learning has taken place. It also depicts how digital learning in higher education was conceived in Brazilian educational policies, both before, and because of the pandemic between 2020 and 2021. It contends that digital learning has been faced with two differing concepts by the public and the private sector of Brazilian higher education, either in a transformative, multicultural approach, or in a consumer, massified perspective. Based on a multicultural, intersectional approach, it argues that for higher education to have a strong impact in preparing future professionals for dealing with the challenges of globalized and multicultural societies, it should link digital learning with multicultural, intersectional concerns that value cultural diversity and fight against prejudices and exclusion. In that sense, the Brazilian case can be useful comparatively, by illustrating the potentials and the challenges of digital learning in a structurally unequal, multicultural countries.

Multicultural Digital Learning for a Multicultural Society: The Case of Brazil

From a social justice and multicultural perspective, we the present paper argues that effective digital learning in higher education is likely to happen when digital curricular contents have been embedded with inclusionary strategies that foster plural students' critical thinking and empowerment (Ivenicki, 2021a, 2021b). Digital learning should therefore provide both meaningful learning and the strengthening of cultural identities of learners, so that it be relevant for individual, professional, and personal growth, apart from yielding more flexible forms of higher education provision for lifelong learners.

Such an approach to digital learning should be relevant when discussing the context of multicultural countries, such as Brazil. To discuss digital learning and the role of higher education in Brazil, a cursory look at its contextual scenario is relevant. Brazil is a multicultural country, with considerable challenges in terms of educational and social inequality. It is the largest country in South America, with a population of more than 203 million people (IBGE, 2023). Racial and ethnic composition of the population as self-declared by the subjects in the survey carried out by the IBGE (2021) is as follows: 43 % self-declare as white, 9% as black, 47% as brown and 1% as indigenous. According to Neves and Eckert (2017), social and economic inequality is high, for instance, 1% of the Brazilian population belongs to upper social and economic classes, their income being 85% higher than that of the 50% poorer segments of the population.

The higher education system in Brazil is composed of a variety of HEIs. According to Neves and Eckert (2017), in administrative terms they can be either public (federal or state institutions, which charge no fees from students) or private (whose revenues are mostly from students' fees), the latter being either non-profit (mainly denominational, community-oriented institutions, such as the Pontifical Catholic University and its branches) or for-profit (mainly connected to a few large educational groups traded on the national stock market).

In academic terms, those HEIs can be universities (in which faculty holds Master and PhD degrees and the research component is present); university centers (mainly geared towards teaching, with practically no research component); and non-university institutions (which include independent faculties, technological centers and institutes, with little autonomy and subject to the National Council of Education). Neves and Eckert (2017) also point out that the growth of higher education in Brazil mostly resulted from a dynamic private sector, in such a way that in 2015 87.5% were private HEIs against 12.5% public HEIs. Teacher education courses, called "Licenciaturas" have been developed in higher education institutions, both public and private. However, it should be pointed out that quality also varies, inasmuch as public universities, and denominational ones (specially the Pontifical Catholic University) are generally well positioned in terms of higher education assessment carried out by government, particularly in terms of research papers and knowledge production in the several curriculum areas.

Access to higher education is made by the ENEM, which is the National Secondary Exam as public universities are highly sought after, the grades that students gain in the exam favor those students that had had higher educational opportunities in their school preparation. In that sense, ethnic and racial minorities used to be marginalized from those universities, and they have a high representation of upper, white social classes. As pointed out by Ivenicki (2021a), research by Almeida et al. (2018) in Brazil confirms the relevance of multicultural, intersectional approaches to education, by signaling ways in which the categories race and ethnicity are often intertwined with other social configurations, such as class, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, Almeida et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of recognizing such overlapping

for the formulation of teaching strategies and learning aimed at understanding and respecting cultural diversity and combatting inequality in Brazil.

The relevance of multicultural thinking that aims to address those inequalities can be gauged by government initiative to introduce the system of quotas in public, federal universities, by the Law 12.711/2012 (Brasil, 2012), geared towards fostering access of black, poor, and indigenous groups to those HEIs. The intersection of race and social class for the quotas seems to have been reinforced by research from Honorato and Zuccarelli, 2020. This research showed that both identity markers should be considered together so that inclusion should be efficient.

Based on a multicultural, intersectional approach, Ivenicki (2021a) argues that for higher education to have a strong impact in preparing future professionals for dealing with the challenges of globalized and multicultural societies, it should link digital learning with multicultural, intersectional concerns that value cultural diversity and fight against prejudices and exclusion. That multicultural, intersectional approach is reinforced by research developed by Honorato and Zuccarelli (2020) about students that had access to public, federal universities through social class and race quotas. The study showed that the intersection between both identity markers was present in a much larger number of students than those analyzed just in terms of their social class. That shows that the intersectional multicultural perspective has been effective by considering the intersection of race and social class to promote cultural diversity and inclusion in HEIs. Once catering for access, the support that those groups receive has still room for improvement (Honorato & Zuccarelli, 2020). Curriculum strategies that should be geared towards those students who still need reinforcement, to avoid evasion and dropouts.

Higher Education and Digital Learning: The Brazilian Case

Against the scenario of a vast multicultural society, it is important to note that the enrollment rate for higher education is 32.7% (Nitahara, 2019). This number is still very far from the universalization that a higher education system governed by lifelong learning principles requires, a situation similar to that described for Mexico by Álvarez-Mendiola (2012). Some attempts to expand the coverage/ enrollment rate and the participation of underrepresented social sectors in Brazilian higher education have included entry quotas in public universities for black and indigenous groups; government student financing programs aimed to place academically qualified low-income students into private higher education institutions; fostering the increase in night higher education courses and courses of shorter duration, among others.

As contended by Ivenicki (2021b), statistics should be relevant at this point, to ascertain the respective role of the public and the private higher education sectors in Brazil. Data before the pandemics showed that in 2017. participation of the private sector of higher education was 75% (Brazil, 2018, found in Ivenicki, 2021b), which means that for each four higher education students, three were attending private institutions. Also, data from the same source (Brazil, 2018) indicated that distant learning increased in 17.5% in that year, representing 21.2% of undergraduate Brazilian students. Focusing particularly on teacher education courses, 46.8% attended distant courses and 53.2% on on-site ones. It should be noted that such percentages drop when analyzing the public sector, where 81.7% of students attend on-site courses against 18.3% in long distance ones, compared to 64.1% that attend long distance courses in private higher education institutions against 35.9% in on-site ones (Brazil, 2018).

However, the percentage of those that got into the system and those that fell out of it also calls the attention, drop-out being high. Some hypotheses could be linked to what has been discussed in the previous section, namely: even though access has been improved to higher education through quotas and other initiatives, more multicultural curriculum should be thought of. In fact, for each 1000 inhabitants, 31.5% entered higher education institutions and 12.3% dropped out. In fact, according to higher education census, since 2003, Brazil has experienced a higher education boom, new courses being offered both in public and private universities (Brazil, 2018), and the number of e-learning students grew 30 times in a decade (from 2002 to 2013). There has been a leap in access to technology, with more people using the internet, which has caused an increase in enrolment rates in distance courses (e-learning) from 49,000 undergraduate students in 2003 to over 1.5 million ten years later (Brazil, 2018).

Against that background, distant higher education courses have been the focus of educational policies at federal, and at state and municipal levels. Before internet and digital learning, printed media, visual objects, and other technologies were used in extension/community educational projects by higher education institutions, as well as for distant higher teacher education courses. Ivenicki (2021b), argued that in 2003, a landmark in digital lifelong learning in Brazil was created, namely the Universidade Aberta do Brasil (Open University of Brazil) (Brazil, 2020a). It is a distance higher education program developed by a consortium of Brazilian public universities geared at offering online higher education courses, so far being focused on teacher initial and continuing education. Such a program aims to amplify and disseminate to far-off

regions in Brazil courses and programs of higher education, prioritizing teacher initial and continuing education, including the provision of higher education for those teachers who do not hold higher education certificates, and who already work in Brazilian school. The Brazilian Open University (Brazil, 2020a) allows students to get in touch with tutors and professors, as well as have access to libraries and laboratories of information technology, biology, chemistry, and physics. The policy document also discusses the development of a national distance online system of higher education in Brazil that values cultural diversity, including adult education, education for human rights, for ethnic and racial relations, gender identities and other themes, therefore within an equity and multicultural agenda, at the level of intentions. As posited by Ivenicki (2018, 2019), multicultural sensitivities in Brazilian educational policies tend to be present side by side with the need to situate Brazilian education positively in the global, technological world.

In terms of digital learning, the Brazilian Open University has been employing hybrid systems, normally requires that students to be present for end of year for exams, and that the parts newly developed online (it counts on 555 "poles", which generally are schools or educational centers in Brazilian municipalities, where computers are available for students). It is noteworthy that even though such a program can be considered a relevant point in digital learning, the fact that it mostly covers teacher education courses convey its limitations in that area. Also, higher education census supports the information related to high dropout rates (49%), due to financial constraints. Those financial constraints mostly referred to the need of students to work and their ensuing difficulties in attending virtual classes and comply with homework assignments. Also, the fact that complete teacher education courses (both for basic and secondary teachers) may be considered more feasible to be developed online to the detriment of other careers such as Medicine, Engineering and so forth may raise questions related to virtual higher education and its value in the Brazilian society.

In fact, polarizations have been present ever since, between those who have considered the possibility of high quality digital distant learning in higher education against those who have systematically shunned that idea in favor of the so-called "superiority" of on-site higher education courses. Such dichotomic and polarized perspectives have led to a failure to extend the scope of the Universidade Aberta do Brasil, (Brazil, 2020) as well as other means to boost digital learning higher education courses and experiences, in all areas, including lifelong learning. Lately, drop in economic investments in education have also impacted both on-site and distant-learning courses. Those drops in investment have happened in a political context in which the role of science and of HEIs was seriously undervalued by government, particularly between 2019 and 2023. Such drops attained public, government supported HEIs, both federal and state, with serious impacts to the day-to-day development of research and teaching, as well as to the very functioning of infra-structure, which has also had impact in the provision of both on-site and on-line modalities.

In fact, as Ivenicki (2021b) noted, digital learning as part of distance higher education learning has been object of different views up to now. On the one hand, it has been recognized as an important means to provide education and teacher education within contexts of large countries, such as Brazil. In those cases, it has been pointed as the main avenue for what has been called as the "interiorization" of university in the most remote Brazilian areas, meaning that students in cities and little towns away from the big centers could attend classes and become teachers by attending virtual classes. On the other hand, however, those online distance courses that build on digital learning have also been charged with deepening social inequalities insofar as a minority of students in peripheric countries have access to digital learning. Additionally, from the pedagogical perspective, digital learning has also been viewed as providing lesser possibilities for transformative education, being tantamount to exchange of ideas and to the exposure of differences that presence learning allows. Undoubtedly such views have been expressed more in the way of debates and conversations, but they were underlying thoughts that depends on everyday views about online and on-site HEIs classes.

Focusing on the adoption of digital leaning in higher education in general, Renda dos Santos and Okazaki (2015) point out that social networking sites have been useful tools among faculty members. They point out that the use of Facebook or Linked-in has become increasingly popular among higher education faculty in Brazil, nearly 85% having a Facebook account, in addition to sites that register research citations, nowadays some of which are Academia, Scopus, Researchgate, among others, which includes about 1.2 million registered users, organizing their research, creating personal profiles, and searching for people with similar scholarly interests.

On the other hand, Parreiras and Macedo (2020) hold that digital technologies used in Brazilian higher education needs to enhance faculty's expertise to make use of them in actual teaching experiences with students. They also point out that even though most Brazilian do have mobile devices, there are still difficulties in access to sites and difficulties to download programs of learning that need more modern computers, all of which compound educational inequality. Apart from that, Parreiras and Macedo (2020) claim that private and public higher education courses differ as related to digital

remote learning, the private sector making use of it to dismiss tutors and professors in favor of online classes with a high number of students guided by very few tutors and professors, therefore being problematic for the quality of education. In that area, according to Parreiras and Macedo (2020), distance education emerged as a promising and profitable bet for most private institutions, which have been using both textbooks produced by large company partners, and pre-recorded lessons.

Ivenicki (2021a,b) contends that those dichotomic ideas, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil brought to light digital learning and its challenges, as well as its potentials and contradictions, to which educational policies, as well as higher education institutions and actors, have been called to respond.

Digital Learning and Educational Policies in the Pandemic and (Post) Pandemic: Perspectives

The onset of the pandemic of COVID 19 in 2020 made an astounding mark for digital communication and digital learning worldwide, as claimed by Dias and Pinto (2020). In fact, as claimed by the referred authors, the Covid-19 crisis resulted in the end of classes in schools and universities, affecting more than 90% of the students in the world.

In multicultural and unequal countries such as Brazil, there were mixed effects related to multicultural and equity sensitive concerns. Those concerns related to both aspects referred to the challenges of access to digital artefacts, as well as to the articulation of digital learning and curriculum practices.

Brazilian news has consistently pointed out that most students in Brazil, including adult students, have not had access to digital learning to be able to attend on-line courses. On 20th May 2020, after strong pressure from academics and students, the Ministry of Education decided to postpone the National Exam for the Secondary System (ENEM), that was due to take place in November 2020, due to the inequality of access to on-line classes from most of the population. That was an important decision bearing in mind difficulty in admission into higher education in Brazil, which is very low compared to international standards.

Such an unequal access to online and digital artefacts has also been felt at the higher education level itself. The panacea by which digital learning has been perceived in educational policies suffered a reality check. The lack of access to digital technologies to be able to attend on-line higher education classes as claimed by Dias and Pinto (2020) also impinged on the decision of most of public Brazilian universities to suspend the academic calendar of 2020 rather than go on with it through on-line and digital learning strategies. Administrative implications regarding admission to HEIs was postponed even though calendars had to have an overhaul in order to compensate for that period, with classes having been given during holiday periods afterwards, in 2021, as soon as the vaccination started.

On the other hand, the Conselho Nacional de Educação (Brazilian National Council of Education -CNE), which is a counselling federal institution that advises the Ministry of Education about educational affairs, issued a directive to be taken in the pandemic, towards distant digital learning in Brazilian schools (Brazil, CNE, 2020), which suggests measures based on digital learning should be adopted during the pandemic period by schools and higher education institutions. Some of those measures included HEIs should replace on-site classes by remote, distant learning classes through digital technologies, including assessment practices, as well as organize teacher training in a way that could prepare teacher educators to deal with those. Also, it recommended that the entry selection of students should also be done in a digital way, and that HEI faculty should make use of social media such as Facebook, Instagram and so forth, in order to foster and supervise studies and projects from students. Such initiatives were efficient to the extent that academic activities could be developed, even though future research could gauge its results more precisely. In fact, the referred document acknowledged that the census carried out by the INEP, the National Institute for Studies and Educational Researcher Anisio Teixeira, cited by Brazil, CNE (2020), confirms that Brazil has 8,740,338 students in all areas and courses of higher education, and distant on-line courses covers 40% of the total of 3,445,935 of the students that entered both in the private and public sectors of higher education in 2018. The public sector of higher education being responsible for 60,000 registrations of students. The CNE document (National Council of Education, 2020) also states that registration of students in on-line distant higher education courses doubled since 2008, particularly emphasizing, once more, teacher education courses.

On the other hand, it states that even though 7,170,567 places were opened for higher education on-line distant courses, both in private and public higher education institutions, only 19% of them were filled. The possibility of all higher education courses providing 40% of their curricula on-line was suggested in another Ministry of Education document (Brazil, Ministry of Education, 2019b). However, the extent to which institutions have (or have not) adhered to that model has not been assessed so far.

It is important to note that even though distant learning has been central to protect lives during the pandemic time, the lack of conditions to use technological means has been a deterrent to the success of that mode of learning, both for the

public and the private sector. According to Parreiras and Macedo (2020), the census in 2018 showed that only 41.7% of Brazilian households had microcomputers, and that from the 79.1% of the other users, 99.2% used their cell phones, with unequal power of connection to the internet.

Another issue that was noticed was that the change of 40% of on-site courses to long distance ones in the private sector has resulted in the demise of higher education faculty and the ensuing increase of classes with overload for those remaining faculty, as well as the dropping out of students, as mentioned before. That way, even though distant on-line courses in Brazil apparently increased, it still lacks a more widespread coverage. The document of the Ministry of Education (Brazil, Ministry of Education, 2019) stressed the importance of widening the offer of distant on-line higher education courses, and to offer conditions so that the access to technological computer platforms might be successful (even though it was not stated how that could be done).

Concerning a previously mentioned document (Brazil, CNE, 2020), specifically stressed the importance of hybrid mechanisms (such as the Open University referred to in the last sections of this paper), and went on to refer to the COVID 19 pandemic and to the Portaria (Law) MEC (Ministry of Education) nº 345/2020 (Brazil, Ministry of Education, 2020b) that gave authorization, in an exceptional way, for higher education institutions to change on-site classes by others that use digital technologies, including theoretical disciplines of the course of Medicine, with the exception of laboratories and teaching practice disciplines. Also, the document suggests that extension higher education projects – which are those geared towards society at large, including lifelong learning projects - should benefit digital technologies in areas such as teacher continuing education; environmental education and sustainability; human development and social responsibility; supporting teachers and future teachers in creating digital curricular materials; and educational actions geared towards preventing the contamination by COVID-19 at the time.

Additionally, the referred document by the Ministry of Education (Brazil, CNE, 2020) recommended that higher education institutions should replace on-site classes by remote, distant learning classes through digital technologies, including assessment practices, as well as organize teacher training in a way that could prepare teacher educators to deal with those. Among those measures, there was the recommendation that the entry selection of students should also be done in a digital way, and that higher education institutions should make use of social media such as Facebook, Instagram etc., in order to foster and supervise studies and projects.

Reactions from higher education institutions were mixed (Ivenicki, 2021b). As public universities in Brazil have autonomy, their senates should decide about the academic year calendar and the extent to which government recommendations were feasible. A public university in Rio de Janeiro, (kept anonymous for the research ethics), for example issued some directives relative to digital learning in which concerns were expressed relative to both students' access to those technologies and to higher education professors' training to develop digital materials and deliver on-line classes.

On March 22, 2020, the office of the Rector of the high echelon of that university issued an internal memorandum (kept anonymous for the ethics of the research) to on-line digital education in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The document stated that in spite of the new policy of the Ministry of Education that recommended the substitution of on-site classes to on-line digital ones, there should be a concern about equity educational issues. According to it, there were lots of students from lower economic strata, as well as those with special education needs, who would be unequally treated in such a curriculum due to the fact they would not be able to have access to digital technologies in an efficient way. Therefore, the document stated that while the pandemic lasted, virtual digital platforms should be employed only in those classes in which such technologies were already in use, stressing that digital technologies should not replace present, on-site classes at the university. It concluded by suspending the academic university calendar until the pandemic was under control. It should be stressed that on-site classes are on again, since the end of 2021, and the university calendar has been resumed. Those initiatives were taken by all federal universities, in favor of students' health in the face of the lockdown in the direst period of the pandemic.

Those two contradictory approaches from most of the private sector (which has been keen on digital learning for profit) and public universities (more imbued with equality and multicultural perspectives) have shown the complexity of digital learning in multicultural countries, as well as in neoliberal societies with high levels of unequal access to technologies. Additionally, other variables have attained digital education throughout the world, which have included the lack of personal interaction in classes, issues related to home challenges while in line, and so forth.

Such a narrative of the complexities of the use of digital technology during the pandemic may well illustrate the ambiguities and challenges that were already in place in higher education concerning the issue (Ivenicki, 2021a, 2021b). Against that backdrop, it is noteworthy that there remains significant disparity within countries in terms of access and equity

opportunities in higher education, including with respect to digital learning, which became even more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. In terms of digital learning, in culturally diverse and socially unequal countries, educational policies should arguably consider the extent to which digital learning should be fostered so that it could enhance learning not just for a few. In that sense, digital learning should not contribute to perpetuate educational inequality.

It is interesting to note that scholars such as Rafalow and Puckett (2022) contend that even in societies where educational level divides in access to digital technologies have shrunk (such as the USA), there still linger inequalities in that many HEIs categorize student digital footprints as part of an informal process to evaluate students. The authors claim that such educational institutions operate as sorting machines, as these tracks lead to "unequal economic outcomes and different life chances for students, predictably along lines of race-ethnicity, class, gender, and other social statuses" (p. 277). That idea links to our argument in that simply reinforcing access to technology is not enough to guarantee educational equity, but rather it is arguably crucial that internal HEI factors such as pedagogy, curriculum and methodologies be adapted to cultural diversity and inclusion.

The above contentions seem to reinforce the argument that digital learning should be dealt with in terms of learning itself, particularly geared towards promoting multicultural competence both in the Brazilian context of the challenges of inequality of plural identities, and in societies with more balanced access to digital technology, such as the USA. The extent to which digital learning exacerbate the divide begs for further research.

Conclusions

The present paper analyzed how digital learning has affected HEIs in the Brazilian context, particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic. It also highlighted structural inequality in the higher education system and how policies of quotas of black, poor, and indigenous groups have contributed to mitigate such inequality in the context of public universities in Brazil. Also, it highlighted differentiated institutional policies in public and private sectors, inequalities in access to technology by students and professors, policies of suspension of entrance exams and school calendar during the pandemic and its consequences on digitalization in Brazilian higher education.

The fact that teachers and higher education professors have been asked to develop digital materials during the pandemic without having been prepared for that should be seriously considered as well. Also, as argued by Araujo et. al. (2020), strategies such as increasing schooling time or the use of technologies should be unlikely to have impact on the achievement of students. They suggest measures such as making more efficient use of time, with intensive tutorship focused on marginalized students.

Two lessons may have been learned during the pandemic, concerning digital learning and higher education. First, that digital learning is foremost about learning itself. In that sense, it is pivotal to clarify what meaningful learning means in the context of higher education, and to what extent faculty are equipped familiar both with the digital technologies and with the curricular and pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering that kind of learning.-Second, equity and social justice educational policies should be considered within the local contexts where digital learning is developed. Within that framework, it is central to problematize the extent to which educational policies target heterogeneous access to technology, particularly in highly unequal societies.

Moreira et. al. (2017) illustrate that need, by expressing how adult learners' cultures and ways of life had a serious impact on the result of the digital on-line distant course they organized for higher education professors. They showed that one of the most relevant weaknesses was the lack of time to do the e-activities, especially when a balance was to be achieved between work, family responsibilities and other daily business and the course requirements, aspects that have been present during the COVID 19 pandemic in several homes where families have been kept in lockdown. Besides the time aspect, another weakness found was that some of the digital tools were perceived as difficult to use, even though the adult students were a group formed by higher education professors, which led the authors to consider cultural contexts and meanings for digital learning to be successful in lifelong learning – an aspect that has also been strongly felt during the COVID 19 pandemic worldwide.

In lifelong learning, Paulo Freire's (1982) approach to adult education and adult literacy has inspired multicultural thinking, in that it highlights the centrality of providing teaching based on generative themes linked to adults' lives for successful curriculum development and literacy competence. Such an approach to learning should be likely to empower students' identities of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and others. It should problematize hegemonic narratives and discourses that essentialize knowledges to the detriment of respecting and building upon plural adult learners' cultural contexts and backgrounds. Such ideas should arguably transform higher education curriculum so that it should be more flexible and

culturally relevant, being adapted both to on-site learning and digital on-line learning, in transformative approaches to lifelong learner.

Future research could develop important aspects such as data on the correlation between multicultural education and the way in which it supports graduates to face the challenges of society. Such research could, for example, examine possible data on the development of the agency of graduates in the social, cultural, and labor world of Brazil. That would certainly give a boost to the relevance of multicultural education. Also, beyond the analysis of the purposes and values of government documents, it is necessary for future research to look into the results of that educational policy. Such future research could try and glean the extent to which the purposes have (or have not) been fulfilled. It would be important to understand possible implementation and results problems.

The experience of the COVID 19 pandemic should give us the opportunity to think about transformative alternatives so that higher education could rethink curriculum and pedagogies, in Brazil and worldwide. Teacher education and lifelong learning should therefore not limit digital learning to a means, but also change curricular content and make it into a new way of learning. That should be done both in the case of on-site courses and distant, digital learning models, so that higher education and lifelong learning positively change towards facing a new digital world.

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