

Distance education, an opportunity in times of COVID-19

## La educación a distancia, una oportunidad en tiempos de la COVID-19

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Dear Readers:

The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, since then, this disease has caused a critical situation in all areas of human life.

To the "*new educational normality*" imposed on us by COVID-19 pandemic as a health care emergency, the environments between professors and students are entirely based on digital resources. Educators, students and institutions are now dealing with educational challenges of teaching and learning processes in virtual scenarios.

There are numerous distance education (DE) university-institutions in Latin America that have assimilated new information and communication technologies. Since the Open University, other programs of distance higher education institutions have begun to develop around the world using very similar didactic means. The first formal action to promote this educational modality in the international context took place in 1938 in the city of Victoria (Canada) where the first International Conference on Education by Correspondence was held.

In Cuba, distance education began in 1971 under the modality of Guided Teaching, both by meetings and by the free modality, focused fundamentally on independent work and self-training. It was materialized as a model of mixed development in the Higher Education centers themselves, which linked distance education with face-to-face education.

In Public Healthcare System, the modality of courses by meetings began in 1981 for the Bachelor's Degree in Nursing, and later, in the specialty of Healthcare Administration. We cannot forget the professional upgrading plan for the doctors of the Piti Fajardo Rural Brigade during the period 1983 to 1985, which was carried out at a distance modality and through face-to-face meetings by means of traveling professorships.

Distance Education as a new modality of instruction and creation of values, in spite of being formally practiced for more than 70 years, in the last three decades has gained great importance and is already developing as the educational modality of this century.

Thanks to the increase of technological platforms to support the teaching-learning process, a blended-learning model has progressively established itself in university education, characterized by the combination of face-to-face and virtual teaching-learning processes, which makes it possible to generate dissimilar learning situations. If anything has become evident is the importance that technology has gained during the year 2020, in relation to this, it can be said that education will undergo major and important changes in the coming years.

Distance Education requires and encourages students to be responsible and creative in the creation of their learning process, to adopt strategies and learning styles based on self-knowledge, as they achieve this, they will learn to learn. As digital environments are something already assimilated and experienced from birth, it is observed the speed with which they manage to integrate even the most abstract concepts.

It is a flexible, dynamic and adaptive learning modality to the environment where it is developed. It is of practical utility, links its programs with the needs of students who are in a remote location, develops self-esteem, creativity and enriches knowledge and learning, it is innovative.

The concept of developmental learning, according to Vygotskian theoretical references, considers developmental teaching as a process that in a systemic and systematic way will transmit the culture in the school institution according to the social task and taking into account the level of development reached by the student, stimulating their potential by guiding them towards higher levels in the development of knowledge, skills and abilities.

Distance Education in Cuba breaks the barriers of time and space by offering methods, techniques and resources that make the teaching-learning process more effective and flexible. With the strengthening of the Cuban healthcare network Infomed in the 1990s, the Virtual Health University project was developed, which is a current expression of the development of this educational modality in Cuba.

In the country, the educational process has been strongly impacted by this situation since March. The Ministry of Higher Education (MES) developed a strategy to cope with the imperative of "staying at home" without impeding the continuity of the course. It is valid to warn about the existing social inequalities that could limit the optimal use of the teaching-learning process in the current conditions, where the government is making efforts to sustain the educational process, despite the difficulties.

Distance Education should be perceived as an opportunity in times of COVID-19, keeping them in social isolation as one of the measures to prevent the disease; the training of professors and students in the use of the virtual classroom; facilitating the continuity of the teaching-teaching process of undergraduate, graduate and continuing education, as well as participation in online scientific events, and at the same time the scientific development of healthcare professionals.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

### **Author's contribution**

The author wrote the editorial in its entirety.