

The University as an Ecological Territory of the Incoming Student: virtual inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT. The article aims to present the ecological territory as an extension project with students entering a federal public university in the south of Brazil while performing virtual workshops during the COVID-19 pandemic. The realization of virtual workshops of the IN project focused on the incoming student (IN) and provided group meetings on themes of the university scope. Thus, we intend to present the experience of developing meetings in virtual workshops in everyday life, considering ecological territory as a daily life to be known and explored by students. The ecological universe gives the university a sense of relationship in an intersectoral and participative nexus in the dynamic spheres, which is vital to academic and personal development. This descriptive and qualitative study covers 32 meetings out of 437 virtual invitations sent, reaching the voluntary participation of 62 students enrolled in the IN Virtual Workshops. Through the content analysis method, we obtained qualitative results from the field diaries in the virtual workshops regarding the sense of belonging, vulnerability, distance education, and social support network. It concludes by excluding online alternatives of contact with incoming students as a public policy of inclusion and university permanence and identifying themselves as a way of welcoming and preventing mental health.

Keywords: university; territory; student; admission; virtual

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ECOLOGICAL TERRITORY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: POSSIBILITIES OF INCLUSION AND PERMANENCE

The democratization of spaces at the Federal Public University has been characterized as a continuous phenomenon where there is the annual entrance of students with different characteristics and singularities from affirmative policies and expansion of vacancies. Thus, it is possible to glimpse the presence of the diverse field of social actors in these institutional spaces. Sampaio H. (2014) points out university systems with complexity and diversity in their collective configurations.

The contingent of students in higher education today, besides being more extensive, is much more heterogeneous in terms of

age, gender, socioeconomic level, color, ethnicity, motivations, expectations, and professional projects. (p. 43)

In this path, the Project directed to the knowledge of incoming students, institutionally called (IN), aims to contemplate since 2019 an integral approach to human, dignified, and citizen formation during the period of inclusion, permanence, and social coexistence, focusing on the singularity of the entry condition.

In our understanding, Ecological Territory adopted was inspired by Guattari's theoretical meaning of interconnected and interdependent spheres as territory. Guattari states that individual and collective human ways of life evolve towards progressive deterioration, necessitating an articulation between the three ecologies (the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity) as a possibility of clarifying these issues. He highlights the form established among various connecting spheres. Its ethical-political articulation, Ecosophy, establishes the relationship among the three ecologies: the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity.

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Family networks tend to be reduced to a minimum. Domestic life is being gangrened by media consumption, marriage and family life is often 'ossified' by standardized behavior, and neighborhood relations are generally reduced to their poorest expression. (p. 7-8)

Guatarri names Ecosophy the relationship between three forms of ecology. In our understanding, we name Ecological Territory under identical three dimensions of analysis: the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and socio-historical context in scope. We consider Ecological Territory as everyday life to be known and explored by students as possibilities of subjective realization in the scope and connection, equaling the interpersonal and socio-environmental context in force in the same dimension. The Ecological universe, in our view, gives the university a sense of relationship, giving an intersectoral and participatory nexus in the dynamic spheres considered vital to academic and personal development.

It is essential to incorporate this phenomenon to integrate another concept brought by Santos (2019) regarding recognizing the process of knowledge *decolonization* and the praxis of Higher Education. A continuous coming and going of different ways of living is recognized from the existence of diversity.

It is possible to analyze according to Santos (1978) cited by Saquet, Silva (2008), that the field of diversities is manifested in territories that are constituted beyond geographical and physical spaces, as a living set of relationships among the subjects built in their daily lives. Territories, then, coexist with different ways of living, cultures, traditions, and values. In territory, the dialectics of its relations are manifest, transforming it into living and existential logic.

Thus, the territory can be considered delimited, constructed, and deconstructed by power relations involving an extensive range of actors who territorialize their actions over time. However, the delimitation may not occur precisely, may be irregular, change historically, and diversify social relations in an increasingly complex power game. (p. 31-32)

Therefore, as a space of transit and belonging to its community, the University is constituted as a territory where the relational logic and stories described go beyond the sense of professional

training to construct personal and social transformation processes. Furthermore, this territory must be explored to understand the importance of diversity in its socio-historical space, where each incoming student must be welcomed and understood in his or her singularities.

We recognize that the daily transit of diverse and different historical subjects at the University has been a challenge in rupturing hegemonic and normative thinking based on academic failure or success, the dialectical construction of knowledge, and local-regional social development. Pazeto, A. E. (2002) helps us reflect on the critical character of the University as a primordial stimulator of unscathed social citizenship, which needs the endorsement of the State as a right and condition for economic and political subsistence.

The Brazilian university's state of the crisis stems from the conflict between the perennial character given to its objectives, on the one hand, and the pressures and transformations that society has been undergoing since the sixties, on the other hand, with direct repercussions on the university. Given this conflict of interests and models, a multiplicity of functions currently manifested in the Brazilian university collide with its primary functions. (p.90)

The fact that students take up their studies again in higher education, becoming student-workers, is considered peculiar. This aspect stands out because they are people older than most, pressured by the job market demands or in search of personal fulfillment.

THE INCOMING STUDENT AT THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

The IN project has been developed by a Dean of Student Affairs of a Federal Public University through activities related to the psychosocial knowledge of new students and practical activities called IN Workshops. In addition, there are strategically developed actions considering the public first-year students. These actions were divided into Project IN phases I, II, and III.

According to the methodology of IN Project, there was a re-edition of phase I of the project, which consisted of applying a psychosocial data form to (IN) students entering the university, those we call IN, in January and February 2020. Thus, in phase I, explanatory participant research is carried out in the Incoming university community by inviting them to voluntarily participate by filling out this form at the Academic Registration. The form

consisted of 28 objective questions with multiple choices and one open-ended, discursive question regarding the expectation of maintaining the permanence in the university and preservation of the quality of life. The general forms of the IN-project's completion amounted to 583 participations equaling 11.25% of the general population of first-year students, those entering in 2020.

Phase II comprised the material analysis diagnostic stage, that is, data from the exploratory participant research with Incoming students. The survey of the forms was elaborated together with Phase III of the IN project, the planning and realization of online virtual workshops with the students. In all these phases, two extension students were part of the team. This allowed us to collect more information about this approach and help students and their surrounding social group regarding signs such as anxiety, irritability, and depression connected to mental health conception. In 2020, 583 students were reached by completing the general registration form for Phase I.

VIRTUAL INCLUSION IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

Due to this emergency, the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic brought new problems and questions to the human and University universe. Therefore, project IN needed to restructure its actions, understanding the virtual scenario as a territory to be explored and problematized. In this sense, the team that comprehends the University as territory needs to understand the digital media as another territory with the following questions: How to build inclusive processes and belong in virtual workshops? What are the impacts of these actions on constructing students' territories? How to understand virtual media and technologies as a space of exchange in living and existential territories?

The need to have a connection and social interaction with the students entering the university comes from the moment when the home confinement instigates behavior review, directly or indirectly, leading to reflections and provoking new ways of relating to the environment. While there is no certainty about the end of social isolation, each student was invited to join this search for answers to uncertainties derived from the pandemic and social distancing. The intention was to positively redefine the person-environment relationship to bring about educational, creative, and innovative actions that can ensure social, emotional, and environmental balance in this period of social confinement.

Thus, in 2020, due to the pandemic, a new systematization methodology was inaugurated for conducting workshops to continue receiving

(IN)coming students at the university. In the healthy Inclusion and Permanence University Theme, it became the opportunity for virtual coexistence between the first-year students in 2020 in a weekly interactive virtual dialogue space in previous schedule invitations. Like all other public and private universities, the university had to structure itself to re-think education in times of social distance due to the pandemic imperative.

The IN Workshops were carried out according to an action methodology in which the IN students (with protected identification when filling out the forms in the General Registry at the university entrance under ethical authorization by the Free and Informed Consent Term - TCLE) were invited to participate in the IN Workshop voluntarily. The systematization was to send invitations to INcoming students through the university's online application with explanations about the objective, methodology, and target audience.

Likewise, the IN-Workshop WhatsApp groups were created with a request to fill out the Google Docs form through the university application to form the IN Workshop group. When the Google docs form was filled out, 30 IN students joined, according to the opportunity to spread the word and this measure to all IN team members.

Thus, this study aims to present the effects of the pandemic on incoming students considering the analysis of the impacts of these activities on the students' daily lives, having been the interactive connection strategy of the IN Workshops for these actors' permanence within the University. The impacts of the IN workshops were explored in detail in the authors' article "Virtual IN workshop with students entering higher education: dialogical space in times of pandemic" in 10CIAIQ2021.

THE VIRTUALITY OF INCOMING STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY

The experience report of the activities developed by the IN Workshops, in remote mode, considered the psychosocial profile of the students participating in the activities, 62 throughout the process of weekly meetings, with Bardin's Content Analysis through an exhaustive reading of the material in the Field Diaries prepared by the extension students. In the IN Workshops, after defining themes and discussion among the participants, dialogues were freely discussed among the students, identifying similarities in content, and developing common strategies.

Among the identity configuration of the 30 IN students who participated, 60% were members of the general competition, on the graph of the way of (IN)coming the university, with the guarantee of

ethical confidentiality in the free and informed consent form (ICF) included, presented below.

As for the support network in the relational universe of IN students, friends are mentioned, followed by the mother figure, about the search for

conversation or the sense of "being able to count on" in the established social relationship identified in the following graph.

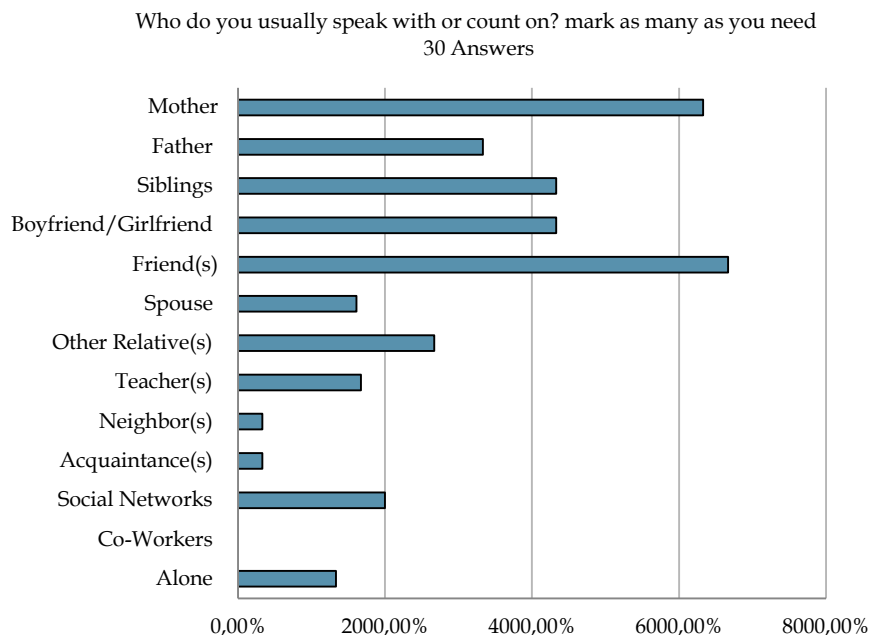


Figure 1. Higher education students' support network

Throughout the extension project in 2020, 32 meetings out of 437 calls/invitations took place, reaching the participation of 62 students that were listed in the individual registration grid of each of the meetings, in several invitations and number of attendances, indicative of 14.18% among the invitations prepared for this purpose. However, what stands out is the dialogical relationship established, resulting in significant developments peculiar to the educational context experienced by the students. Cuesta-Benjumea (2011) highlights reflexive interactivity in all phases of qualitative research.

Indeed, the reflexive process permeates all research study levels, from theoretical orientation to participants' reactions to the research. It is also present at all stages, from the research question to the fieldwork, from data analysis to final report writing. (p.5)

In the uniqueness of this project's target audience (arriving students at UFPR), it is observed that such methodology can favor the expansion of objective repertoire (knowledge) and subjective (linked to the subject's uniqueness), enabling the development of personal and social strategies, with a focus on staying at the university.

In qualitative evaluation, according to the exhaustive reading of the material registered in the Field Diary elaborated by the extension scholars, we obtained the Content Analysis Categories with illustrative statements in the Field Diary of the incoming students in the three main ones, concerning vulnerability, belonging, and virtual teaching.

As for emotional vulnerability, they point out feelings of insecurity: "Feeling "lost" in the sea of fish together with a friend, without friends. The participation of veteran students is important when talking about history.

The second category obtained from the Diaries is related to the *Sense of Belonging*, referring to the new interactions and possibilities: "there are activities at the academic center, and this is motivating, does something, offers something to do, it is very advantageous, besides getting to know several new things."

Finally, the virtual education model suggests several types of questions, difficulties, and divergent interests such as "Much has been said about the difficulties of relationships with colleagues, as in the reports of Natalia who reported not having the support of colleagues to keep up with her classes.

Numerous questions and study preferences are addressed, including the for-distance learning classes working or not. In addition, there are

questions about the methodological evaluation at the university, virtual versus face-to-face relationships regarding contacts with the professors, mention of the professor performance, obstacles with the internet, class organization, motivation, and expectations.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we conceive that being in social isolation implies different ways of life and changes in people's daily lives needing to understand the virtual territory as something also to be built concerning the sense of belonging. Silva et (2020) reflects on the importance of educational actions to ensure emotional and social balance in this period of social confinement.

At the expense of social isolation measures, people have had to reinvent themselves, rediscover and adapt; staying at home has never brought many reflections. On the other hand, worries are present, especially about future scenarios. (p. 142)

In the field of institutionality, universities had to design a series of institutional arrangements that included research development focused on the impacts, fight against the pandemic, and the remote development of academic activities. This has implied curricular changes, didactics, and actions based on distance education. Undergraduate students, in this scenario, needed to transition into new ways of being at the University, organizing new routines in parallel with the fear of an uncertain future. In a study, Ferrinho (2020) highlights lifestyle changes among college students and identified the main lifestyle changes in this group, regarding the experience of ambivalence and health concerns, in all its dimensions, as a primary factor at this time of life.

Negative feelings of frustration, anxiety, anger, and boredom coexisted with positive feelings of joy, hope, pride, and relief. This is amid frequent worries about health, education, profession, relationships, and financial situation. (p. 52)

Since its conception, the IN Project has considered the ecological dimension of the territory in the different contexts and connections established by the students in the surrounding academic and social universe. When students were asked to identify different characters in their lives as components of their social support networks attributing different roles and importance to each

person in Project IN, similarly, Ferrinho (2020) verifies family agents, friends, and colleagues assuming attributions from financial, emotional support, and help in academic difficulties. Moreover, it also concluded on the restricted recognition of the faculty figure as a supportive element of the university community, a fundamental factor for further and future analysis.

The incoming/first-year students, besides experiencing the impacts of the pandemic on their lives and the university structure, go through the process of their belonging to the University as newcomers, from a diverse territory, also in transformation. The results presented here show the importance of Project IN's actions to this public in developing network support and expansion when constructing enriched daily lives at the University, even if virtual.

Also, according to UNICEF (2020), the promotion of care for children and young people during the pandemic should be anchored in support systems based on public policies, family presence, and the school and health system. In this perspective, it is up to the institutions, in this case, the university, to develop actions based on welcoming and maintaining bonds, including as a resource for mental health.

The interconnections between mental health and the other SDGs are evident. The violation of rights and discrimination directly affects mental health. How we address the improvement of education, the reduction of inequalities, the exit from poverty and hunger, the universalization of decent work, and the fight against violence and gender equality will have a very relevant impact on mental health, especially for those groups that are more vulnerable. (p. 33)

In this sense, the discussion about diversity and the challenges of building an inclusive University, beyond the guarantee of vacancies and construction of knowledge projects in existential territories expanded and based on the difference, has resurged. Hence, there is continuity in developing the university actions in the absorption and connection of the other instances and Deans' offices in discussing university inclusion and permanence. How do we extend university students' support in an inclusive, democratic, and diversified perspective? And notably, to the incoming students due to the increasing implication on the university mental health and course graduation?

In the educational scenario, the pandemic represented a challenge to change paradigms for the construction of knowledge and modification in the

relational spaces, needing to understand the virtual territory as something also to be built concerning the sense of belonging.

The IN Project, in readapting the methodology of its activities, faced challenges linked to the sensitivity of virtual encounters, which also contributed to the understanding of other realities in which the student is immersed, for example, knowing his or her daily life more profoundly. Accordingly, being now merged in the relationship between academic and personal or home life. Alcantara, R. de et al. (2018) advocate knowledge as production and not a linear appropriation of reality, which figure as pillars of qualitative research.

The legitimacy of research, from this perspective, is not in the direct observation of the studied object, which characterizes many inductive kinds of research, but in what is generated from the construction of information and its processes in constant articulation, which promote intelligibility about what is studied and favor generalization levels even in the face of complex human phenomena. (p. 148)

Moreover, the virtual IN Workshops favored this link in a playful and free group process, providing moments in which the subjects are in synchrony, forming new social support networks and strengthening the existing ones in the personal analysis of their potentialities. Ultimately, this resource is configured as an agent for the inclusion and permanence of these students, the ultimate goal of student assistance.

Therefore, for this moment, the IN project concludes that the challenge is set for the adhesion of new social actors and new subjectivities less used to this act of talking/reflecting/doing in the construction of new paradigms related to the process of living in the university and measures of personal/social confrontation to the pandemic.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

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