

Distance Educational Relationship and Senses of Belonging: The voices of students

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Abstract

In a viral society in which the social being claims the ability to maintain distance and the socially desirable representation of the body, in particular the face, claims its concealment, the distance educational relationship represents a critical area that deserves to be highlighted in the research agendas. This study aims to explore the sense of belonging of 144 students who attend a distance learning university. For this purpose, an open-ended questionnaire was applied, previously disclosed in closed groups on social networks. The students' sense of belonging was analysed through the types of connections they maintain with the campus, course, peers and teachers. The analysis of the narratives expresses a great diversity, density of experiences and expectations in the connections and senses of belonging. Attributing great importance to teachers in the appropriation of knowledge, it is essentially with their peers - other students - that the connections and sense of belonging acquire greater expression.

Keywords

Digital education; Distance education; Relationality; Belonging; Students

Relación educativa a distancia y sentimiento de pertenencia: las voces de los estudiantes

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Resumen

En una sociedad viral en la que el ser social reivindica la capacidad de mantener la distancia y en la que la representación socialmente deseable del cuerpo, en particular del rostro, reivindica su ocultamiento, la relación educativa a distancia representa un área crítica que ha de ser más valorada en las agendas de investigación. En este estudio se pretende explorar el sentimiento de pertenencia de 144 estudiantes que acuden a una universidad a distancia. Para ello, se ha aplicado un cuestionario abierto, previamente difundido en grupos cerrados de estudiantes en las redes sociales. Se analiza el sentimiento de pertenencia de los estudiantes a través de los tipos de conexiones que mantienen con el campus, el curso, los compañeros y los profesores. El análisis de las narrativas manifiesta una gran diversidad y densidad de experiencias y de expectativas en las conexiones y sentimientos de pertenencia. Si bien los profesores adquieren un rol importante en la apropiación del conocimiento, son esencialmente los compañeros el foco principal de las conexiones y del sentimiento de pertenencia.

Palabras clave

Educación digital; Educación a distancia; Relacionalidad; Pertenencia; Estudiantes.

I. Introduction

In the viral society we currently live in, the *social being* has become synonymous with *maintaining distance* and the *socially desirable representation of the body*, in particular the face, consists of its *concealment* (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021). In this context, the analysis of educational relationships, in general, and distance education relationships, in particular, acquires great relevance for different reasons. On one hand, because it is important to give visibility to the quality of pedagogical relationships, through research and the deep knowledge produced in this field. On the other hand, the fact that we are teaching at a distance university increases the scientific and social responsibility of the need to study and reflect on this domain in a systematic way.

a. Digital education and its limits

The digital age is in full expansion and reconfiguration. Digital is present in public spaces, at work, at leisure and in private spaces. Being part of everyday life, the digital has become adaptable, currently occupying the first place in educational agendas. However, discussions on Digital Education tend to be focused on digital devices and networks, in an imaginary in which technologies are the solution to educational problems (Feenberg, 2017b, Sancho, 2020), to the detriment of other dimensions such as structures, values and social relations, the praxis of educational agents who intervene in highly complex contexts. The hurrying of digitization observed in recent years, reified by technical and instrumental perspectives within a technical rationality, has promoted dualisms of the on/off, analogue/digital, native/digital immigrant types that have not contributed to the identification of answers to the classic problems digitization and its divides in educational contexts. If, in the viral society in which we live, this paradigm has been consolidated on a global scale, it has also provoked radical responses from researchers who have developed other perspectives on this issue, framing the multiple faces of education in the digital age in new epistemologies and in highly complex contexts of a fluid, uncertain and intermittent nature, in which the digital and the analog, the material, the multimodal, the old and the new coexist and merge (Castañeda, 2019; Castañeda & Selwin, 2018; Jandric & Hayes, 2021). These epistemologies propose new analytical frameworks that redirect the epistemic object of *the tool* to *education* and *pedagogy*, to overcome a thinking that tends to ignore the social (Feenberg, 2017a), human, biodigital and sociocultural dimension of education in the age of digitization (Jandric & Hayes, 2021; Jandric, Hayes, Truelove et al, 2020). Taking for granted the argument that the digital does not represent a replacement, extension or improvement of the offline, but a world - the everyday life, other positions on knowledge, teaching and learning that find echo in interdisciplinary research communities are called for (Bayne, 2017; Jandric & Hayes, 2021, Gourlay, 2020).

Distance educational relationality is one of the critical themes that deserves to be revisited within the framework of these fluid and critical epistemologies, in order to contribute with other readings on new educational topologies (Law & Mol, 2002; Bayne et al, 2014) and positioning of the agents of the pedagogical relationship, in the era of digitalization.

b. Pedagogy of Distance Relationship

The pedagogy of relationship traditionally contemplates an ideal of school that privileges interaction and dialogue between different agents of the educational community, particularly between teachers and students. This relationship involves the commitment of teachers and students to a process that is common, shared and associated with feelings, such as belonging, which are built up in different instances of academic life.

Although pedagogical relationality represents an essential domain in the learning lives of students and teachers, this is a theme that has been under-theorized in educational research by a paradigm

that has not equally valued an ethos of involvement, implication and care in educational action (Hayes, 2021).

If we focus our specific object of analysis on the distance pedagogical relationship, we come across several constraints, among which, it is important to highlight, first, the classic opposition between face-to-face education and distance education. If the first – on-site – appeals us to the physical and temporal co-presenciality and to the realms of the authentic, the real, the second – from a “distance” – is referred to the realm of artificiality, the imaginary, the unreal. This representation is felt markedly in conservative sectors of education that link distance education to an immaterial, 'imagined', 'virtual' world, with a low educational value. Conceptions of this nature were particularly visible in the first phase of the health crisis we are going through, despite communities, groups and individuals continuing their life trajectories and engaging in multiple human activities online (Gourlay et al, 2021), ensuring its survival as a species.

Seen as second by teaching cultures that traditionally elected a tangible, sedentary presence with closed borders as a context of excellence for the appropriation of scientific knowledge, distance education has been legitimized in a long tradition of peripheral pedagogical research in higher education. This pedagogical tradition allows us today to question educational topographies based on assumptions that sacralise a relationality confined in physical borders, which ignores other nuanced ways of understanding the fluid mobility of students in the digital society and which remains radicalized in the artificiality of the opposition between an absence and a tangible presence (Bayne et, 2014; Gourlay, 2022; Jandric & Hayes, Jandric & Ford, 2020).

In the 21st Century, educational institutions cannot be interpreted as geographically limited places in static buildings in which education takes place, but as complex contexts where multiple agents intervene in dispersed and changing places and times (Ingold, 1993; Jonet & Erstad, 2018; Mol & Law, 199, Law & Mol, 2001). In this sense, we argue, in line with Hayes (2018), that distance is a positive principle and online distance learning is a privileged way of learning.

The need to analyse distance educational relationships, a subject that has not been privileged in educational research in recent decades, also acquires another relevance in the period of health crisis in which the embodiment of individual and collective actions takes on new nuances. In this sense, it is important to ask what is the meaning and how are the distance senses of belonging constructed in educational environments?

c. Sense of belonging

Belonging is a macro category that allows us to explore positionings (Saavedra, Arias-Sanchez, De la Mata, 2021, Hayes, 2021) about the nature of the relationships created and developed in different instances of educational environments. These positions can be known through the connections that students create and develop in those environments (Gourlay et al. 2021; Bayne et al, 2017). The different forms of belonging are reflected in the involvement with others, in the activities carried out, in the ways in which agents communicate or participate in the construction of a shared identity. The quality of relationship promoted in an educational institution and the played role of students and teachers are therefore essential categories for the construction of complex and diverse senses of belonging in an educational context. Connections, belongings, relationalities are thus different levels of a pedagogy of the relationship rooted in an ethic of care in educational communities. Assuming that belonging is a essential dimension in a pedagogical paradigm marked by uncertainty (Barnett, 2012), this study explores the voices of students who attend a Portuguese Distance Education University, about the relationships they maintain with the higher education institution that they attend.

II. Methodology

This study is part of a large research project, of a qualitative and exploratory nature (Creswell, 2014), that intends to answer the following question: *How do students who attend an online distance university express and characterize their sense of belonging to their university?* This question was subdivided into the following question: *What types of connections are established between students and the campus, the syllabus they are taking and especially the peers and teachers?* This study privileges the answer to the last sub-question.

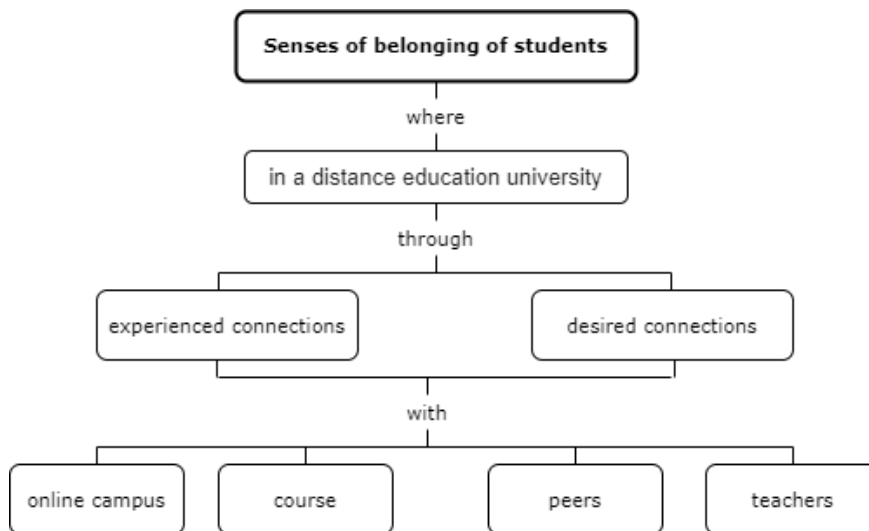


Figure 1. Analytical framework
Source: Own work

a. Participants, Research Context and Method

This study involved students who attend a Portuguese distance education university in 2021. Taking into account the small number of studies on this issue, it was considered the adoption of the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) the most appropriate method. As Grounded Theory involves the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained in social contexts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we found that this method would be suitable to explore the relationships of students in their scholar contexts (Crooks, 2001). We did not choose a tabula rasa perspective. On the contrary, we considered the literature review in the exploratory analysis of students' narratives (Glaser, 1992). Grounded theory enabled us to go beyond a level of assumptions about academic experiences of students and to understand what students consider as being significant in their connections with the multiple instances of their lives at the university.

In this study, the participants are members of natural groups of students from different 1st and 2nd cycle programs. Communication with these groups was initiated by one of the members of the research team who was also one of the representative students at the university. This student-researcher announced the project to the representatives of the other programs in her university and asked them to invite classmates to answer the online questionnaire. This communication process was ensured via informal WhatsApp groups whose members, students, are properly identified.

The students were asked to obtain a sketch, albeit tenuous, exploratory, of more evident dimensions of the relationship they maintain in different instances of their university life, with the expectation of, at a later stage of the research project, accessing the chronotopes of the learning lives of these students (Jornet & Erstad, 2018; Bakhtin, 1981, Ritella, Rajala & Renshaw, 2020).

In this sense, it was decided to prepare and apply a brief online questionnaire with 19 open questions created in Google Forms and applied in two steps: firstly, between September 24 and 30, and, secondly, between November 19 and 28, 2021. In this article, the narratives collected in the second phase of the study are presented and analysed.

Open-ended questions were the appropriate type of information gathering, as they promote free thinking based on knowledge, a greater diversity of answers and, for a target audience with higher educational qualifications, as in the case, they grant greater fidelity to the opinion of the interviewed students.

The questionnaire applied in the second phase of the study incorporated 3 dimensions: 1) meanings of the campus; 2) experienced connections to campus, course, peers and teachers; 3) desired connections to campus, course, peers, and teachers. The instrument was disseminated in several groups created by students in different social networks. They are closed, informal and study groups, made up of students who attend distance licentiate's and master's courses in different areas: Social and Environmental Sciences, Education, Mathematics, Computing, Applied Languages, Humanities, European and Artistic Studies, Management and History.

The study is registered at the research center of the principal investigator and follows international guidelines for ethics in educational research (AERA, 2011). In data collection, the principles of data confidentiality, anonymity and a voluntary and informed participation in the study were guaranteed.

In the first phase of our study, 94 students answered the questionnaire, and in the second phase, 50 answered, which makes a total of 144 students. Our sample is predominantly female (78.5%), with an age range that varies between 22 and 67 years old, with the most representative age group located in the 41-50 (45.1%), followed by the 31-40 (31.9%). Of the range of higher education courses attended by students, Education (56.9%) stands out, as well as Management (19,4%) and Applied Languages (16%) (Table 1).

Sociodemographic characterization	n	%
Sex		
Feminine	117	81,3
Masculine	25	17,4
Rather not answer	2	1,4
Age [in age groups]		
≤ 30 years	15	10,4
31 – 40 years	46	31,9
41 – 50 years	65	45,1
51 – 60 years	16	11,1
61 – 70 years	1	0,7
Missing	1	0,7
Course attended		
Education	82	56,9
Social Sciences	7	4,9
Management	28	19,4

Computer Science and engineering	1	0,7
Applied Mathematics for Management	1	0,7
Applied Languages	23	16
History	1	0,7
Pedagogical Supervision	1	0,7

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization of the sample
Source: Own work

III. Results and Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in a cyclical process. This process involved (1) an exploratory analysis of the responses, (2) the identification of macro categories; (3) the construction of a body of categories; (4) a process of coding; (5) the exploration of interconnections between macro-categories and categories that allow the identification of constructs and its connections in different dimensions of pedagogical relationality (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In the analysis of the narratives, content analysis was applied, in a logic of interpretive analysis of texts and consequent decomposition and subsequent reconstruction of the discourse, applying logical rules to create categories. As such, inductive reasoning to produce knowledge was privileged, which presupposes the classification of analytical categories and the dynamic relationships that are established between them a posteriori. Credibility was assured through an internal triangulation carried out by the senior researcher and the two junior researchers, along the definition of categories, the coding process, and the analysis of provisional results (Colás, 1992). Figure 2 represents the first exploratory analysis of dimensions and categories.

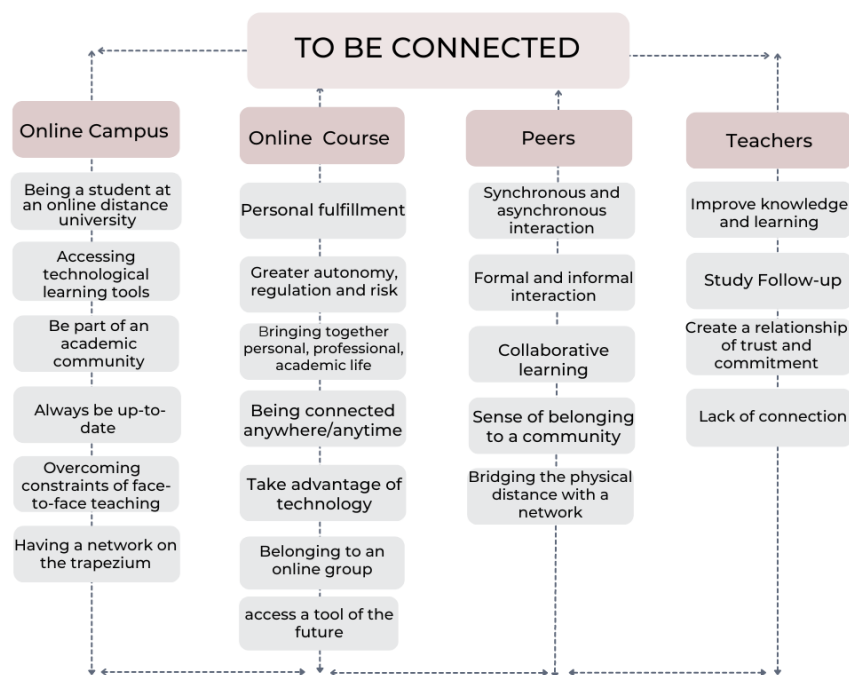


Figure 2. Exploratory tree of dimensions and categories
Source: Own work

a. Experienced connections on online campus

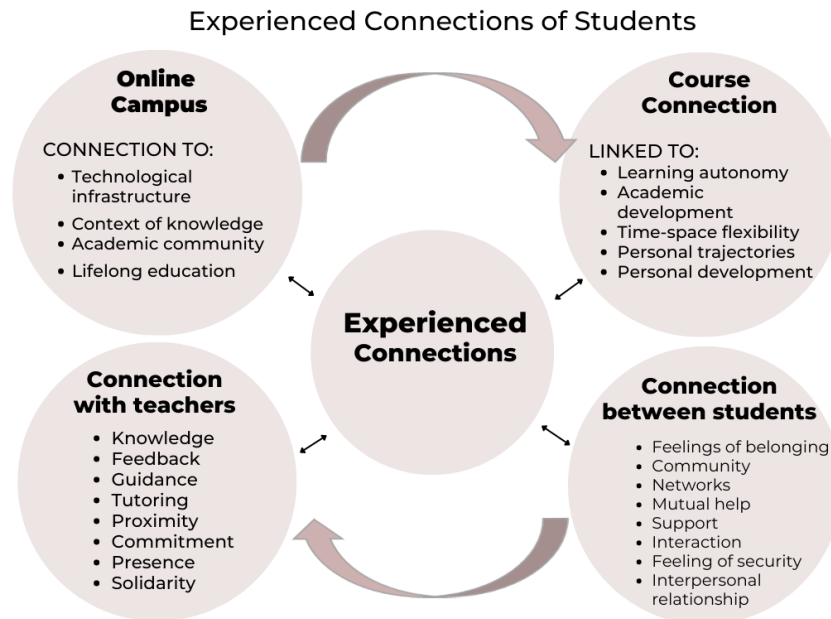


Figure 3. Analytical framework of experienced connections of students who attend an online distance university
Source: Own work

The value of “being connected”, whether in ecological or material terms, represents an essential need (Bayne, 2017). In distance education, being connected, more than a functional quality, has an affective and relational quality; it is reflected in academic, affective, social and relational development, in the well-being of students, visible at different levels of the system, in particular in the relationship between teachers and students and between them and their peers. The sense of connection goes beyond the technical level of connectivity, bandwidth and is not limited to the simulation of the presence through synchrony, in accessing materials, resources and activities. The sense of connection is built in collaboration, in initiatives that benefit the well-being, in relational dynamics and inseparable involvement from the sense of belonging and inclusion. This connection of students is promoted in different instances, in formal and informal learning promoted and associated with the university.

Online Campus Meanings

For students, the online campus is a meeting space for the academic community, it is context of interaction between people who are part of a community, a way to access knowledge. It can also be a space of loneliness.

- “It’s a world, literally. I was surprised by the possibilities we have for this study model. (Education student, 49 years old)
- “A university like any other.” (Education student, 37 years old)
- “It’s the university and everything in it, but online”. (Education student, 44 years old)
- “It’s the entire community of an online university” (Education student, 38 years old)
- “Virtual place where colleagues anywhere in the world can exchange and share ideas.” (Education student, 33 years old)
- “It is the place of learning and interaction with teachers” (Management student, 27 years old)

"It is an online study site." (Education student, 30 years old)

Campus Connection

In this study, the connection of students to the campus is identified in the following domains: *instrumental and technological*; *knowledge*; *lifelong education*; and *community*.

- The access to the online campus is promoted through two specific areas: the *technological infrastructure and devices* and the *information domain*. This accessibility is associated with the sense of access to useful information in a short chronological period.

"The permanent availability of learning tools, a platform where all the contents of the Curricular Units are located, and all the services provided by the University." (Education student, 48 years old)

- The campus represents a context of *knowledge* and constant updating, learning and culture.

"I like everything that has to do with acquiring and debating new knowledge." (Education student, 48 years old)

"Being virtually connected to the world of knowledge, learning, culture." (Education student, 56 years old)

- The connection to the campus is also linked to *lifelong education*.

"It means that I have to be constantly updated and responsible for my presence in it." (Education student, 42 years old)

- Campus designs are linked to *communities* of different academic nature, knowledge and emotional well-being.

"Connection to the institution, to the academic community, to knowledge and network communities, from multiple spaces and permanently." (Education student, 47 years old)

Course connection

The narratives about the connection to the course are associated with individual experiences – with their preferences and trajectories, learning dynamics and, once again, with personal development. In a specific case, it takes on a relational dimension or lack thereof. In a specific way, characteristics of the autonomy of learning emerge, namely: self-regulation, independence, flexibility, freedom, autonomy in the management of time-space:

"It meant like a gift to me. Learning from behind a computer. Trying to enrich my skills, and manage to reconcile with my professional life." (Education student, 41 years old)

"Surprisingly it means being immersed in a more autonomous and self-directed educational experience." (Education student, 35 years old)

"Freedom and control of time." (Education student, 40 years old)

"The only way to reconcile personal, family, professional and student life." (Education student, 39 years old)

"Be at your own risk." (Education student, 38 years old)

"Be committed to learning even from a distance and contributing to a better educated society, more critical and active in the future through everyone. Here are technologies within reach at present... It means exploring new opportunities.

It can be a very lonely thing." (Education student, 49 years old)

Academic development, the sense of flexibility and autonomy are particularly expressed in connection with the course.

Connection between students

The connection between peers is linked in the students' narratives to the feeling of belonging to a community, to support and mutual help networks, to formal and informal interaction, synchronous and asynchronous, to the interpersonal relationship.

"The feeling of "belonging" to a community is important, as is collaboration in the study." (Education student, 55 years old)

"It's good to interact with other people, cultures and others to share opinions." (Education student, 35 years old)

"It means sharing doubts and ideas, which ends up instilling motivation." (Education student, 38 years old)

"Being able to share the pains and joys." (Education student, 35 years old)

"It's good to feel that on the other side of the screen someone feels the same as me and that I'm not alone." (Education student, 45 years old)

"It serves to pinch us and realize that even at a distance we are there at the school..." (Education student, 49 years old)

"It is important to shorten the distance (...) since we share studies and much of the personal sphere that unites us." (Education student, 49 years old)

"It's knowing that colleagues feel what I feel, they have the same worries and stress. Not being alone on this route." (Education student, 50 years old)

"They are the support network." (Education student, 38 years old)

This connection is multidimensional - emotional, social, well-being, relational. The sense of belonging, interaction, mutual help, friendship, sharing, collaboration, complicity, interaction, support, security, community and disagreement are expressed in a more vehement way in the relationship with colleagues. The ludic is present in the lived experiences. The community and the relationship with peers characterize bonds that interfere in the social, affective and relational development of students. It is associated with feelings of security, emotional well-being and personal development, a sense of belonging to a wider community that is the university.

Connections with teachers

The connection with teachers is expressed, in particular, in the construction of knowledge, interaction and communication. Feedback on access to knowledge, guidance and support, proximity and commitment, help, seeking presence and solidarity, improving learning are relevant categories in the students' voices. Although less articulated, this connection is also relational, of commitment and trust. This fact needs to be deepened. It seems to be understood that the teacher's chronotope expressed by the students is not limited to the role of advisor, but also of a specialist in an area of knowledge, as well as technological and pedagogical expert.

“Get the support you need to succeed.” (Education student, 41 years old)

“Interacting with teachers, receiving teaching resources and being evaluated as a student.” (Social Sciences student, 53 years old)

“The possibility of being close yet physically distant.” (Education student, 47 years old)

“Basically the same as being connected to colleagues, but in which they clearly have a duty to provide formal information to support the student” (Education student, 48 years old)

“It means commitment.” (Education student, 38 years old)

“we can really count on them for the purpose and for the purpose that justifies them, they are the bridge between the knowledge we had before and what we can create in this environment, and they can guide and help us on our journey by being available for it which is not always the case or vocation either online or in person.” (Education student, 49 years old)

“It's very important. It's knowing that I can talk to everyone at any time. Then just wait for the answer.” (Education student, 49 years old)

“I think it's the Achilles' heel [...]. It is necessary to innovate, take advantage of new technologies (zooms, webinars, teams) for greater interaction between students and teachers. It can't just be the sharing of pdfs on the platform and information about what will have to be read.” (Education student, 41 years old)

“A closer relationship.” (Education student, 44 years old)

b. Desired connections on campus online

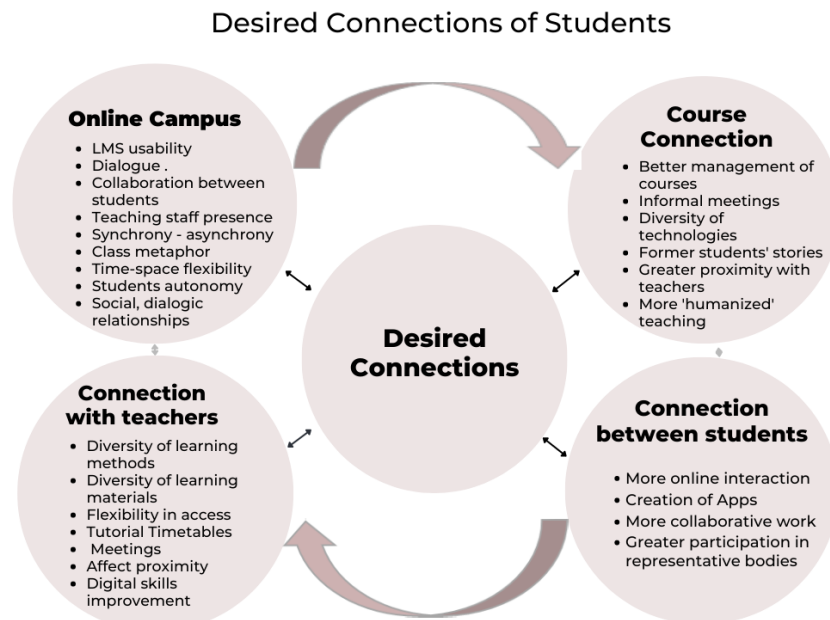


Figure 4. Analytical framework of desired connections of students who attend an online distance university
Source: Own work

When confronted with the desired connection, the most prominent categories are the followings:

- In the *connection to the campus*, although there is an appeal for *improvements in the usability of the platform*, namely *synchronous communication tools* (chat and others), the imagery of this connection seems to be rooted in the growing of relations with the campus through the promotion of *dialogue, of intensified collaboration between students in debates, lectures, greater teaching staff presence, synchronous and asynchronous "classes"*. These students use the metaphor of "classes" as a reference for the contexts of learning and formal teaching, but these topologies are clearly differentiated from the traditional concept. These classes are flexible spaces-times for learning, without borders, mediated by technologies and the Internet, for communication and interaction, in which students and their autonomy are requested values. Synchrony is claimed, above all, in a relational dimension, the need to get to know teachers and their peers. Although the desired connection to the campus presents several nuances, the social and dialogic relationship, collaborative knowledge, is insisted upon.

"the existence of lectures, debates so that we can get to know each other and interact, we have all the tools for that" (Education student, 50 years old)

"Greater interaction between those involved in the educational process" (Education student, 55 years old)

"More "online" actions that would allow contact with professors and colleagues (...) It is complex to study without realizing if we are having the correct understanding ... I mean that there may be no doubts, but the interpretation is not correct ... these classes would be an asset to motivation and academic success" (Education student, 38 years old)

"Force a routine to exist." (Education student, 41 years old)

- The *desired connection to the course* suggests *better management of curricular units, greater proximity to teachers, diversity of supports in the presentation of content, informal meetings, reports from former students, a more 'humanized' teaching*.

"More humanization of teaching and a strong and decisive presence of the university as a basic institution" (Education student, 35 years old)

"Virtual student status, entitled to merit scholarships." (Education student, 32 years old)

"Possibility for teachers to have time to schedule more synchronous classes" (Education student, 49 years old)

- *Connecting with peers* is expected to *intensify online interaction and mutual help between peers, the creation of Apps that streamline student interaction, more collaborative work, greater participation in student representative bodies*.

"Ease and clarity in the forums, namely that there were clear rules and etiquette." (Education student, 40 years old)

"To have a space that was effectively ours, so that we could interact with each other" (Education student, 48 years old)

"In an online course it is not easy to create bonds or empathy. Make an appointment between students." (Education student, 45 years old)

- The *desired connection with teachers* is mainly oriented towards learning methodologies and materials for distance teaching and learning, the high importance of diversity and flexibility of experiences in accessing knowledge through communication - *frequent meetings, times to clarify doubts, greater diversity of materials and supports*. In the relational domain, in addition to the intensification of communication, *greater affective proximity, monitoring and feedback, accessibility, innovation, understanding of the specificity of older students are desired*.

"Create an interaction model between professor and student" (Social Sciences student, 54 years old)

"Greater harmony regarding their relationship with the students, as some are extremely present (which is great) and others extremely absent (not so good)" (Education student, 57 years old)

"More openness and involvement of some to show their face and make synchronous meetings with us would be great" (Education student, 49 years old)

Students seem to attribute to teachers the locus of the pedagogical relationship and their digital, pedagogical, communicational and affective/emotional competences. It is expected from the teachers to have *basic digital skills* and orientation towards *pedagogical innovation*, practice *digital proximity*, promote *time management*, *motivation*, *openness*, *support*, *cooperation*. To avoid a more distant interpersonal relationship between teacher-student, students suggest the mutual development of social skills, in the sense of greater *reciprocity*, so that the class represents not only a *learning space*, but also a *socialization space*, enunciating competing characteristics to both social actors: *feedback*, *collaboration*, *communication*, *empathy*, *openness*, *respect and trust*.

There is substantially less remarks then of expected concerning the connections with peers (other students). In this case, *discipline and autonomy* are highlighted as essential principles in the management of the study and, in turn, in the relationship with teachers. However, in their narratives, the students emphasize the connections experienced and expected with their peers.

c. From experienced to desired

The pedagogical relationship drawn from the senses of *belonging* is disseminated in different instances of the same ecosystem: the campus, the course, in the relationship between colleagues and teachers. When comparing experienced and desired connections, the dimensions remain unchanged, albeit with different levels of quality. A closer relational bond is desired, through more *communication*, *presence*, *interactivity* and *inclusion* in the domains – *academic*, *scientific*, *affective*, *social*.

The senses of belonging come with the quality of the relationships. They are connected with the *academic*, *affective and social development of students and teachers*. The multiple connections presented by students, experienced and desired, express a strong sense of belonging of students both on campus, in general, and in specific teaching-learning processes.

The most striking experiences at the university cover both academic and scientific development and the affective and social dimensions. In the positive experiences recalled by students, there are *affective bonds* created with teachers, the *effort of teachers to "adapt" to the online context* and their *"professionalism"*, the *digital skills of teachers*, *mutual help between students*, *greater autonomy* and *flexibility of space-time*. Among the most striking negative experiences and feelings are the *feedback and monitoring of learning*, *teachers' digital skills*, *assessment*, *learning resources*, *interaction* between teachers and students and the difficulties in *managing study time*.

In the narratives, relationality emerges as a 'substrate' of different types of university experiences. These experiences in different instances and with different experiences and expectations are intertwined in a single reality: *university life*. The affective and interpersonal complexity of distance pedagogical relationality encompasses, among others, the *value of belonging* (Gourlay et al, 2021). In this specific case, it is the voice of the students that informs these values and constructs. In the next phase of the project, it is expected to gather the voices of teachers.

Experienced and Desired Connections

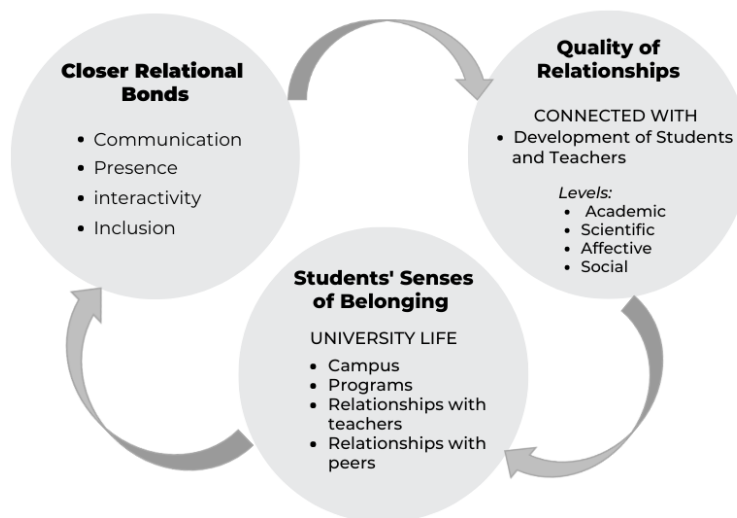


Figure 5. Analytical framework of experienced and desired connections of students who attend an online distance university
Source: Own work

IV. Conclusions

The study was developed in a preliminary and exploratory phase of a project on Pedagogy of Relationship in Distance Education. In this preliminary phase, we intended to explore the senses of belonging of students who attend an online distance university, through their connections to the campus, to the course they are attending and, in particular, to colleagues and professors. Connections to the online campus cover multiple domains: instrumental, communicational, and relational in a wider community. The links to the course are predominantly located in the individual choices and projects, whether in terms of access to knowledge or in a lifelong learning perspective. Relations with teachers are linked with appropriation of knowledge and scientific, pedagogical, and technological skills expected from teachers. Connections with peers - colleagues - is the most expressive dimension, covering feelings and attitudes such as solidarity, mutual help, complicity, friendship, and a sense of community.

More than contributing with answers, this phase of the study reveals multiple issues to be privileged in the next step of the project such as: the unreliable essentialist discourses on Digital Education; the relativity of discourses linked to a regional topology that associate Distance Education to the unreal, fanciful and of fragile quality; the density and enhancement of the distance pedagogical relationship that are felt, embodied, experienced by students; the relevance of deepening the investigation on relationality in educational environments, as embodied, constructed, negotiated and distributed livings.

Limitations of the research

An important limitation of the study concerns the data collection instrument: a questionnaire with open-ended questions. This option relates to the fact that the project is in its exploratory phase and

that there are few previous studies on the phenomenon we intend to investigate. In the next phase of the research, we expect to overcome this limitation by conducting interviews and focus groups mediated by scripts focused on the key dimensions the dimensions and categories we have identified in this paper.

Another limitation concerns the context of the questionnaire administration. Although the invitation to completing the questionnaire was made available exclusively to the students by a member of the research team, the conditions for completing the research instrument were not fully controlled because it was administered in an online and asynchronous context. In the future, we will overcome this limitation by conducting the interviews and discussion groups in restricted access environments, at synchronized times, and with image and sound recording.

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