







# Distance Education: modality that ensured continuity to the Medical Sciences teaching process in Guantánamo, Cuba

## Educación a Distancia: modalidad que aseguró continuidad al proceso docente de Ciencias Médicas en Guantánamo, Cuba

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** among the viruses that produce lethal, highly transmissible acute respiratory infections, the world will not forget the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, responsible for a global pandemic with unfavorable effects in all areas of human development, including Education. Superior. Objective: Provide elements that contribute to the knowledge of Distance Education as a powerful tool in the educational teaching process confirmed during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Method: A narrative review was carried out to identify, analyze, evaluate and interpret the body of knowledge on the topic. To prepare it, the databases Medline, Google academic, Scielo and Dialnet were consulted, with a search strategy designed to obtain results on Distance Education. The limit used was 12 years, (2010-2022). The PubMed search engine was used to perform the search in Medline. More than 50 documents that addressed the topic in their content were selected, and those chosen were determined through reading, selection, and critical appreciation. Theoretical methods were used to analyze the documentation. Results: The reviewed sources allowed us to identify multiple advantages and few disadvantages of Distance Education, as well as the situation of some countries, including Cuba, in relation to technological support and political will to systematize this modality. Conclusions: The review carried out demonstrates that Distance Education as a training modality is an ideal means to continue the educational teaching process, as long as teachers and students are made aware of the need to contribute with their preparation to face the challenge.

### KEYWORDS

Distance Education, Covid 19, Students.

### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** dentro de los virus productores de infecciones respiratorias agudas letales, de alta transmisibilidad, el mundo no olvidará al coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, responsable de una pandemia mundial con efectos desfavorables en todas las áreas de desarrollo humano, dentro de ellas la Educación Superior. Objetivo: Proporcionar elementos que contribuyan al conocimiento de la Educación a Distancia como poderosa herramienta del proceso docente educativo confirmada durante la pandemia del SARS-CoV-2. Método: Se realizó una revisión de tipo narrativo para identificar, analizar, valorar e interpretar

el cuerpo de conocimientos sobre el tema. Para elaborarla se consultaron las bases de datos Medline, Google académico, Scielo y Dialnet, con estrategia de búsqueda diseñada para obtener resultados sobre Educación a distancia. El límite utilizado fue de 12 años, (2010-2022). Se utilizó el buscador PubMed para realizar la búsqueda en Medline. Se seleccionaron más de 50 documentos que abordaron el tema en sus contenidos, y se determinaron los escogidos mediante lectura, selección, y apreciación crítica. Para el análisis de la documentación se emplearon métodos teóricos. Resultados: Las fuentes revisadas permitieron identificar múltiples ventajas y escasas desventajas de la Educación a Distancia, así como la situación de algunos países, entre ellos Cuba, en relación con el apoyo tecnológico y la voluntad política para sistematizar dicha modalidad. Conclusiones: La revisión realizada demuestra que la Educación a Distancia como modalidad formativa, es un medio idóneo para continuar el proceso docente educativo, siempre que se haga consciente en profesores y estudiantes la necesidad de contribuir con su preparación a enfrentar el desafío.

Palabras clave: Educación a Distancia, Covid 19, estudiantes.

## PALABRAS CLAVES

Educación a Distancia, Covid 19, Estudiantes.

## INTRODUCTION

Among the viruses that produce extremely lethal and highly transmissible acute respiratory infections, the world will not forget the SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus due to its unfavorable effects in all areas of human development, including Higher Education, from the measures taken to avoid contagion and preserve life. Since March 11, 2020, when the WHO declared a global pandemic, the disease has been caused by SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), called COVID-19, and the history of humanity has changed.<sup>(1,2)</sup> The daily life of human beings experienced a course never known before, not only because of the constant risk of death but also because of the negative impact of this respiratory disease in the various areas where they carry out their activities. In this sense, higher education was one of those areas that were highly affected, and that is why universities were not unaffected. For example, in the universities of Medical Sciences in Cuba, and particularly in Guantánamo, students from the first to the fifth year of their careers were trained on the disease and, together with professors and workers, joined the fight against the spread of the disease and its fateful effects through various actions, among which stands out the active investigation of cases, work that allowed them to appropriate skills inherent to the profession, and contribute, according to the broad profile of future graduates, to the solution of such a serious health situation.<sup>(2)</sup> However, could distance education represent the solution to the problem of the “presentiality” of the same, at least at the undergraduate level? Distance education as a modality of the teaching-learning process offers multiple advantages that make it ideal for the solution of this problem. For the elaboration of this article, although the sources for consultation are abundant on the Internet, the search was directed to those that responded to the objectives of the same, selecting some of the most relevant to contrast their validity and reliability, extract a small summary of its results, directed to contribute to still skeptical teachers, enough elements to make them reflect on the need to be open to new solutions as demanded by the circumstances, minimizing the lack of creativity or the traditionalism in teaching.

These solutions, framed in distance education, were used with successful results by professors and students of the University of Medical Sciences of Guantánamo to guarantee the continuity of the educational teaching process during the so-called limited autochthonous transmission phase in the course of the last COVID-19 pandemic.

## DEVELOPMENT

The first experiences with Distance Education (DE) date back to the first half of the 18th century, and its historical evolution has been conditioned to the world’s socioeconomic and scientific-technological development.<sup>(3)</sup> Already in the second half of the 20th century, we know of the creation of centers and universities that allowed the advancement and systematization of Distance Education as a training alternative, much more evident since the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT),<sup>(3)</sup> which have integrally facilitated the process, making it gain in scientificity from greater and

faster access to the sources of knowledge. However, What is Distance Education?

Most of the authors of the reviewed literature have conceptualized this term. However, it is relevant, not only for its concise but also for its humanistic approach, the concept of the Colombian author Chávez Torres<sup>5</sup>, who defines it as “a system supported by the available technology, to achieve that all people have access to education, independent of their occupations or places of residence.” This criterion, assumed by the authors of the present article, is also shared by other authors of the reviewed literature.<sup>(6)</sup> In relation to the study cited by the same author, Chávez Torres,<sup>(5)</sup> when referring to flexibility as one of the praiseworthy characteristics of Distance Education, emphasizes how it allows the student to decide his study strategies, which should be configured around him. He is no longer the one who needs to accommodate himself to the institutional conditions and educational programs. In this way, the student can decide his own pace of learning and achieve independent, self-regulated, and meaningful learning. This favorable opinion on the advantages of Distance Education from the point of view of student autonomy is also shared by various researchers on the subject found in the review carried out.<sup>(6,7,8,9,10,11)</sup> For the authors of this article, it is unobjectionable that by accessing this type of disincorporated learning, the student becomes the subject of his activity and thus encourages and propitiates, from his autonomy, the search for the knowledge he will need to solve the priority problems of his future work and social environment.

Some scholars of Distance Education have argued as an unfavorable element, the possibility that the results obtained through its establishment as a formative modality can be influenced fundamentally by the poor preparation of the teachers, who, through the use of inadequate tools, could propitiate a tendency to monotony. They even identify inadequate teacher preparation as a cause of complex pedagogical situations, for example, incoherence between the objectives and the learning tasks proposed and carried out, which would have a negative impact on student evaluations.<sup>(10)</sup> In line with these observations, many researchers agree on the need to empower teachers with the necessary tools in relation to the work of the distance learning modality, especially in its virtual variant, so that they can develop pedagogical skills and abilities and thus increase their confidence and security to act as agents of change in any educational context, a criterion that the authors of this article share.<sup>(13,14,15,16,17,18)</sup>

For this reason, taking into account the approaches outlined above, it is necessary to take advantage of the opportunity offered by this educational modality to promote pedagogical models capable of fostering interrelation and mutual assistance among teachers, with emphasis on the autonomy of students as the protagonists of their learning.<sup>(15,19,20)</sup>

A comprehensive look at distance education as a modality capable of guaranteeing the teaching and learning process could lead to the following question: Can this modality contribute to the formation of values, or should it be considered impossible?

The outstanding researcher García Aretio<sup>(21)</sup> points to the teacher as the instrument capable of transforming data into information that contributes both to the elevation of knowledge and to the formation of attitudes and values in the learners. On the other hand, if one considers the essence of learning as the search for truth, this value is implicit in distance education; if one takes into account the seriousness, attendance, and punctuality required by the teacher-student binomial in this type of education, the value of responsibility is identified; therefore, this value is also implicit in distance education. In this sense, other authors have identified the presence of the value of responsibility in the self-management of learning by the students since they need to carry out actions such as greater personal effort and greater discipline and involvement in the activity to achieve it, and these actions contribute to the value of responsibility;<sup>(11)</sup> for these and other examples, it can be stated that Distance Education is capable of promoting the formation of values in students, and this type of training, especially in its virtual variant, is considered to encompass all types of situations.<sup>(18)</sup> Although various terms are used to refer to distance education, most of them designate variants of it; the most frequently used terms are virtual education and online education. It should be clarified that virtual education (e-learning) is, in fact, a form of distance education that uses cyberspace as a scenario for teaching and learning, where the exchange of information between teachers and students is virtualized through platforms designed for this purpose, many of which are widely used in Cuba (e.g., Moodle).<sup>(11)</sup> From these platforms, students not only collaboratively interact with their classmates but also review, upload, or download class materials, which is why they are considered a good option for the extension of knowledge and educational coverage:<sup>(4,6,7)</sup> the classrooms of the Virtual University offered by Informed through this platform in each provincial node are spaces that, if well used, guarantee the improvement of teachers and students.

In the case of online education, although it is based on virtual education, it is a form of distance education that takes place in real-time, during which the student attends live classes and interacts with teachers and classmates, as occurs in videoconferences, discussion forums and other similar spaces<sup>6,7</sup>, which are very

advantageous for collaborative learning.

In the world, and especially in Latin America, there is a great social gap that is negatively related to Distance Education because the social system has marked the difference between countries, and even within the same country, based on the unequal distribution of wealth and its consequences, which is a determining factor for the incorporation of technological advances; that is why not all countries in our continent were able to offer Distance Education as a training modality to students during the past confinement caused by Covid-19: for example, Mexico<sup>(13)</sup> and Peru<sup>(22)</sup>, among others, had difficulties with the cost of the Internet, connectivity, the necessary equipment, access for disabled students, and the training of teachers in instructional methods and the development of digital competencies.

In Cuba, given its social system, the use of Distance Education in Higher Education dates back more than forty years. Pichs Herrera and collaborators<sup>3</sup> identify three stages that made a better, greater, and faster transition to this type of training possible during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cuba. They are determined by the creation of the Network of Distance Education Institutions in 1979, the decentralization of Distance Education in 2005, and the implementation of the policy for the improvement of Distance Education with the use of ICT in 2015. For Cuba, the existence of disabled students<sup>23</sup> did not constitute a difficulty since they have access to schools designed for them throughout the country.

On the other hand, the inclusion of the use of Information and Communication Technologies as a curricular strategy or as a subject in the basic curriculum of the Careers also facilitated the transfer from one type of training model to another when necessary, without causing deterioration in the components of the educational teaching system. In this sense, the provinces (under the guidance of the national governing institutions) designed their strategies<sup>24</sup>, generally based on the use of resources and tools available in the Virtual Health Classroom of the Informed network, as a support for the development of teaching activities, which was carried out with good results.

In the University of Medical Sciences of Guantánamo, for example, although some teachers were rooted in traditional teaching pedagogical models, the use of Distance Education during the last pandemic showed that they have enough capacity and commitment to assume their functions in the most necessary and convenient scenario at the moment they are needed. This points out that not only training is essential, but also the values present in the teaching staff: this determines that they play a fundamental role in the development of the educational teaching process in whatever scenario they are assigned.

In relation to the teacher-student binomial, the use of Distance Education (especially in its virtual modality) assures the participation of each one in the development of the teaching-student process due to the fact that it involves both actors of the binomial since it is destined to encourage to a greater degree the active participation of the students in their training process, on the one hand, It demands from the teachers the use of forms, methods and teaching techniques that foster this attitude in the students, contribute to their self-preparation and the acquisition of skills, and on the other hand, it demands from the students creativity, responsibility and learning to interact in a collaborative environment, which is created from the adequate interaction of the students with the other members of the process. This last aspect was considered very important and widely verified by the faculty of the University of Medical Sciences of Guantánamo during the last pandemic.

In relation to the relationship established between the students who receive Distance Education and the student group, in the review, it was found that Rivero, Behr, and collaborators,<sup>(25)</sup> in a research published in 2019, identified different interaction modalities: student-content, student-instructor, and student-student, which, according to their criteria, determine greater achievement. This is also influenced by the role of tutoring as an interactive pedagogical process, which requires not only the careful and updated preparation of the teacher to generate and consolidate knowledge, skills, and values in their teaching but also the guarantee of constant monitoring of the Process, and support for students in situations that require it.<sup>(11)</sup> Distance Education can be considered a magnificent option for guaranteeing the teaching-learning process. Distance education (and its semi-presential variant when the necessary conditions are created) constitutes a powerful tool used by the Faculty of Medical Sciences of Guantánamo during the pandemic, with excellent results.

As a result of the changes brought about in the educational system by Covid-19, and taking into account the demands of society itself, it is the opinion of the authors of this article to consider the preparation and training of teachers in this modality.

It is noteworthy in the review that the studies address issues related to academic achievement. In this sense, some authors, in view of the abrupt migration of a part of teachers from the face-to-face to the virtual modality in the last Pandemic without being fully prepared, recommend taking this condition into account when analyzing the results obtained since it could be the cause of scarce creativity and credibility on the part of the teachers, and of a tendency towards rote learning and demotivation in part

of the students, influencing the results of the educational teaching process:<sup>(21,27,27)</sup> this situation was not observed at the University of Medical Sciences of Guantánamo; however, it is undeniably important to broaden the knowledge acquired on the subject and to be prepared, that is, to have the competencies required for the exercise of the profession from this educational option.

Although technological support has allowed a qualitative leap in contemporary pedagogy and in the conception of the teaching-learning process, the following statement by the researcher García Aretio is extremely pertinent: "... the answer is affirmative if the learning objectives are clear and the designs of methodology, resources, evaluation, etc. are coherent with each other and adjust to each other, are consistent with each other and conform to quality pedagogical parameters"<sup>28</sup>, so that self-preparation, in order to provide and receive quality Distance Education (including the virtual variant), should be a priority objective for all teachers and students of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of Guantánamo.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The situation that the world is living in today highlights the need to promote the development of the potentialities of the subjects that make up society; in this sense, the strategies designed for the decentralization of knowledge and scientific-technical advances should be strengthened through a training model that allows access to a greater number of people: Distance Education, as a training modality, proves to be an ideal means for this, provided that, from the appropriate selection of subject and year, teachers and students are made aware of the need to contribute with their preparation to face the challenge, from an action in accordance with the political will of the country, and with the current social demands.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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