

## QUALITY, e-CITIZENSHIP AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: A POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP

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**ABSTRACT:** This study is part of a national and international research network on the regulation and quality of distance education (EaD) and aims to understand and relate e-citizenship to quality as an important element in ensuring the development of EaD from a socially referenced perspective. To this end, a bibliographic survey was conducted in the international repository Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), considering the period 2019-2023. It was concluded that the inclusion of e-citizenship as one of the indicators of socially referenced quality in distance education is relevant, due to the similarity of their concepts and purposes in the training of emancipated professional citizens.

**KEYWORDS:** Distance Education; e-Citizenship; Socially Referenced Quality.

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### INTRODUCTION

Distance Education (EaD) is a teaching modality in Brazil, as established in Article 80 of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação, our translation) No. 9.394, of December 20, 1996 (BRASIL, 1996). Since then, it has followed a trajectory of policies, programs, and actions that have changed over time, creating a movement of inflection and flexibilization of its regulation to favor the private sphere, the privileged place of enrollment and courses in the country. This movement underlines the question and doubts whether distance education can be developed and offered with quality or not. In addition, the literature has raised various questions and defenses as to whether distance education is a teaching modality; whether it is education using technology; or whether it is a type of education, including, and erroneously, distance education.

Therefore, EaD is always surrounded by questions, with answers that are never consensual among its researchers and sometimes involve researchers who do not have expertise in the field, including the viability of its use, whether it is viable or not.

This study, a bibliographical survey, seeks to deepen the research previously carried out on quality in EaD, but now in addition to its relationship with e-citizenship, based on the assumption that e-citizenship is one of the important elements in the development of quality assurance in EaD from a socially referenced perspective.

In this sense, e-citizenship is understood as digital citizenship, in other words, when there is an understanding of the rules of interaction/interactivity in the online environment, with responsibility/respect, critical thoughts/attitudes, exercise of values, and ethical choices. In a previous study on the relationship between human formation, citizenship, digital technologies, and education, Lima (2022) already defended the use of

digital technologies in education for a formation aimed at digital democratic citizenship, taking into account the current neoliberal context and the influence of social networks on the perception of reality and the actions of individuals in their countries and beyond. We will now try to analyze how this relationship can be established in the works found in the bibliographic survey, especially when we consider EaD from a socially referenced perspective (LIMA; ALONSO, 2021).

To this end, the article is divided into three parts: (i) the methodology developed and used; (ii) what is meant by e-Citizenship and its relationship to education; and (iii) EaD from a socially referenced perspective concerning e-Citizenship.

#### METHODOLOGY AND STUDY PATHS

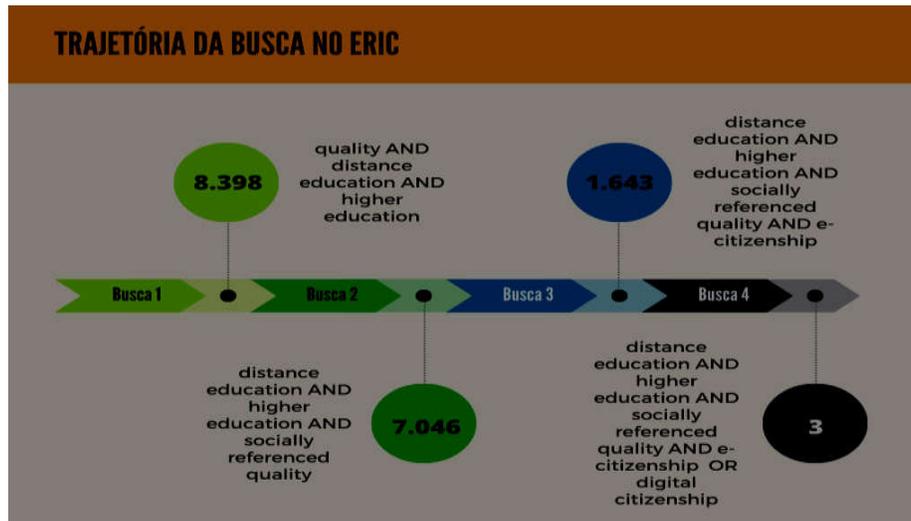
As already informed, this study represents a continuation of the research from the bibliographic survey built within the Distance Education Research Network - Midwest, which began as research funded by the CNPq between 2015 and 2018, and with new research funded between 2019 and 2021, dealing with the institutionalization and quality of distance education.

Now, this study was one of those carried out as part of the research network that has the support of the Associação Universidade em Rede (Unirede), entitled "Quality and regulation in the context of open, flexible and distance education - Brazil/International" [our translation], (2021-2024)<sup>1</sup>, led by the same author of this text, which used a qualitative approach to data collection, despite the use of numerical data to understand the reality, of the bibliographic survey type.

The search aimed to understand how studies have dealt internationally with the relationship between quality, e-Citizenship, and distance education. Thus, the search was carried out in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) repository, analyzing the works available between 2019 and 2023, which relied on some paths and exclusion criteria to delimit the study, in addition to some sets of descriptors. The data were collected in November and December 2022.

The trajectory considered the use of different sets of descriptors so that a smaller number of works were delimited, followed by the analysis of the last set of the search and search 3, as shown in the following graph:

Figure 1: Search path



Source: Elaborated by the author (2023) using the Canva application (<https://www.canva.br>)

The period used (2019-2023) was due to the continuity of what had already been collected in previous surveys. The descriptors used were those shown in Figure 1. To deepen the topic, we used the three (3) papers from Search 4 and selected another 26 papers from the 1,643 papers found in Search 3. For the selection, we considered, in the following order: the title (we excluded research that was not from higher education and focused on titles that somehow contained the main descriptors used); the abstract; and the content of the paper. For the record, the authors of the articles found with these descriptors are mostly from Australia, the United Kingdom, China, India, South Africa, Germany, the United States, Turkey, Spain, Canada, Finland, Russia, Italy, Malaysia, and Portugal, among others. Brazil is the country with the fewest articles indexed in ERIC on this topic.

#### CIVILITY, e-CITIZENSHIP AND EDUCATION

In recent years, the theme of civility, democracy, and their relationship with technologies has been the subject of study by researchers working on the relationship between technology and education (STOCCHETTI, 2014; STODDARD, 2014; CARPENDER, 2017; FLYNN, 2020; LIMA, 2022). We understand that this is due to the current context in which technologies are part of people's social, personal, and work lives, influencing the way we conceive of and engage with the world. In addition, the misuse of social networks has spread, largely characterized by the presence of fake news and post-truths, influencing local and global decisions, as well as electoral ones, further provoking this discussion and the search for relationships.

First of all, we need to understand that there is a difference in the way citizenship is used, whether we consider the democratic or the neoliberal context

(STOCCHETTI, 2014; PAIS; COSTA, 2020). To think about the conjuncture of the use of digital technologies and education, it is important to understand the contradiction of these biases, especially in order to think about e-citizenship.

For Stocchetti (2014), both the neoliberal and democratic contexts need technologies to fulfill their pedagogies for thinking about citizen education. The neoliberal context requires education for elites (who administer and ideologically reproduce the political order) and for the oppressed (consumers who ensure ideological reproduction in alienated and uncritical ways), while democratic education requires a single pedagogy in which everyone can participate with equal rights in a political order legitimized by the possibility of social change.

Pais and Costa (2020) also argue that we have two discourses/terminologies that indicate how education should be dedicated to global citizenship, critical democracy and neoliberalism, which works as competing forces to define the content and practical implications of what citizenship is talked about. The neoliberal discourse is based on the idea that education should prepare people for a world that is already given, in which there is no need to criticize, question, or even imagine alternatives to today's political arrangements. From this perspective, the goal of education is to make people competitive, entrepreneurial, and individualistic, with an emphasis on market values.

According to the premises of the two authors, in the discourse of critical democracy, the principles are based on social justice, diversity, equality, and deliberative democracy, in which the sense of belonging to a larger community is emphasized, in other words, a critical engagement with the world. This perspective "seeks to reveal the processes that hide differences, create inequalities and perpetuate exploitation" (PAIS; COSTA, 2020, p. 7, our translation).

What about e-Citizenship? One of the most cited authors in the selected works when developing the concept of digital citizenship is Mike Ribble (2015). The author argues that citizenship cannot be considered in terms of digitality or "reality," but that it is important to include the term digital in citizenship to understand and use this place. To develop electronic citizenship, nine elements need to be considered and their uses questioned (RIBBLE, 2015):

- 1- Digital access: do we have full and unrestricted participation in electronic access by society?
- 2- Digital commerce: do users have the knowledge and protection to buy and sell in a digital world?
- 3- Digital communication: can citizens understand the different communication methods used?
- 4- Digital literacy: are citizens digitally literate, i.e. able to interact and use the tools available digitally? Do teaching and learning processes take into account the use of technologies with technologies?
- 5- Digital etiquette: do users consider respect for others when using digital media?
- 6- Digital regulations/laws: Are users aware of the regulations/laws that deal with the use of digital technologies in the country?

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7- Digital rights and responsibilities: Are rights and responsibilities extended to everyone? Are users prepared to protect the rights of others and to defend their digital rights?

8- Digital health and well-being: Do users consider the physical and psychological risks of using digital media?

9- Digital security: Are precautions taken for safety and self-protection?

The selected works, when conceptualizing e-citizenship, always follow some of these elements presented above and defended by Ribble (2015). Martin, Gezer, and Wang (2019) reflect that having e-citizenship, that is, being a digital citizen, means having appropriate and responsible standards of behavior on the Internet in a respectful, tolerant, safe, and secure manner. Dunaway and Macharia (2021) outline some of the elements that demonstrate digital citizenship: appropriate online behavior; engagement on the Internet; online ability to participate in society as a democratic citizen; interacting in a safe, responsible, and ethical manner; and being digitally literate.

However, if we look at the nine elements created by Ribble (2015) and supported by other authors, for them to exist and be developed, in addition to appropriate public policies and regulations, we need training for digital education. It is not possible to think about the space of e-citizenship without considering what Paulo Freire (1996, p. 33, our translation) recognized when he conceptualized education, which is "to be formed in substance," as the practice of freedom in the search for the problematization of reality through dialogue, stimulating reflection and action by citizens on reality and, as a result, its transformation, emancipation. Thus, we infer here the defense of the search for training and preparation for e-citizenship through education. Martin, Gezer, and Wang (2019) state that e-citizenship is multidimensional, including knowledge, attitude and behavior. And it requires digital education, in other words, curricula, and programs that provide this training.

As Carpenter (2017) rightly points out, teaching with and about the digital and online space offers an approach that can help students grow as digital citizens in a democracy. This requires investment and public policy.

IS EAD POSSIBLE, VIABLE, FEASIBLE FROM A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE AND IN TERMS OF E-CITIZENSHIP?

This study defines distance education as a way of teaching in which the teaching-learning process takes place in different times and spaces, and students and teachers are not always synchronous in dialogue or interaction. For this to happen, the processes must be mediated by technologies (whether digital or analog), with their own pedagogical and management architecture, qualified multidisciplinary and pedagogical professionals, taking into account their communication processes, as well as a specific curriculum. These elements are important because they define EaD as a modality and not just another form of education using technology.

In order to offer and develop distance education as a modality, it is important to consider a system that has as its operational and developmental base a perspective of distance education with socially referenced quality, as shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: System for the provision and development of EaD



Source: Elaborated by the author (2022) using the Canva application (<https://www.canva.br>)

When it comes to quality, there are two perspectives: a mercoeconomic one and a socially referenced one (which we defend in this study). According to Silva (2009), the mercoeconomic perspective uses principles of competitiveness and profit; measurable measures and levels (measured by numerical indices), and is based on inputs that lead to better results. The social approach is not limited to mathematical formulas (numerical data) and is committed to the community. Silva (2009) and the authors Dourado and Oliveira (2009) go on to say that this approach respects differences (it is a policy of inclusion) and its premises are dialogue; collaborative work; democratic and collective/collegial processes; and, finally, adequate public funding.

What about distance education? What does it mean to have socially referenced quality as a basis for operation and development? Lima and Alonso (2021) understand that socially referenced EaD is one in which the concept of distance education as a modality and the specificities inherent to it are clear, and which has been institutionalized at the macro level (with specific state regulations, regulations and public policies for the modality that contribute to its implementation), meso (with provision for distance education in institutional documents, in the institution's routine, in the management and institutional collegiate/decisional bodies and the budget

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forecast) and micro (with dimensions and indicators that include the provision of courses). To this end, it must be based on:

in processes that include clarity of objectives, dialogic and democratic collective/collaborative decision-making processes, the definition of changes for the development of the modality, monitoring and evaluation processes, the use of technologies in a critical, emancipatory way and aimed at digital inclusion, both in terms of access and training (LIMA; ALONSO, 2021, p. 35, our translation)<sup>2</sup>.

At the macro level, Acosta, Palmer, and Romo-González (2021) recommend: policies for access to high-quality broadband technology; improving data collection on programs and courses offered through distance learning; establishing and funding a federal scientific research agenda; and creating federal grant programs to support the training of teachers and professionals who work and will work in EaD.

About the micro aspect, Acosta, Palmer, and Romo-González (2021) point out that it is essential to think about some aspects of a quality digital EaD: implementing a digital structure for course use; content, and activities in an organized manner and with clear communication; objectives should be clear and aligned; regular feedback should be offered; developing and using support technologies (student and teacher); supporting students' interactive and connecting processes.

To support and promote interactive processes, it is necessary to use technology and the digital environment. Therefore, developing distance learning courses online or with digital technology resources also requires training for e-citizenship, in which training with use is intrinsically related to/for use (they are interrelated), because "when we become active users and participants in a digital environment, we become entitled to the benefits and privileges that the digital world offers, but there is an obligation for users and participants to be digital citizens" (HAWAMDEH et al., 2022, p. 6.038, our translation/interpretation).

Hawamdeh et al (2022) argue that the most challenging issue today is the existence of insufficient digital knowledge among students, who still do not adequately use technology as an indicator of digital citizenship, while awareness and knowledge of e-Citizenship is a fundamental criterion for the quality of EaD. In addition, to demonstrate the importance of digital citizenship education in EaD, the authors highlight the example of the approaches that The Open University Library (UK) has adopted to ensure that EaD students acquire all the digital skills necessary to study at university, to work as professionals and to engage in life throughout their learning, i.e. to become e-citizens.

However, teachers/educators also need to promote digital citizenship in distance education, and this can be achieved through online discussions about digital citizenship and distance education, encouraging activities outside of social media, sharing video resources, and including digital citizenship in online learning assignments. (HAWAMDEH et al., 2022, p. 6.041, our translation/interpretation).

Thus, the proposal of Hawamdeh et al. (2022) is to integrate digital citizenship into the curricula of EaD courses without compromising or contradicting the assumptions of social quality as the operational and developmental basis of the courses. What is advocated in this study is that they should be developed together, as long as they are developed from the same perspective, i.e. a critical democratic perspective of e-Citizenship and socially referenced quality.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this study, we argue that online EaD should be offered on a democratic, e-citizen basis and have dialogue, reflection, and problematization as its basic premise for human emancipation. In this way, there is no way to separate socially referenced quality from training for critical democratic e-citizenship, since the majority of distance learning courses offered today make use of digital technologies, and both are based on reflective and critical thinking, training, and collective and ethical decision-making, based on collaborative work, respect for differences, and the development of responsible behavior.

How can we have a socially referenced education without digital access, literacy, communication, etiquette, security, and regulation, in other words, without training for e-citizenship? Socially referenced quality and training for e-citizenship (digital citizenship) are at the heart of what we are currently defending: democracy, in its foundation, practice, and development. In this way, we will be able to educate citizens from Paulo Freire's perspective,

What I think is fundamental for us today, as mechanics or physicists, educators or bricklayers, carpenters or biologists, is to adopt a critical, vigilant, inquisitive attitude toward technology. Neither to demonize it on the one hand nor to deify it on the other.

Perhaps never has the almost perfect phrase - to control technology and put it at the service of man - been so urgently needed as it is today, in defense of freedom itself, without which the dream of democracy fades" (FREIRE, 1992, p. 133, our free translation)<sup>3</sup>.

Long live democracy!

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#### QUALIDADE, e-CIDADANIA E EDUCAÇÃO A DISTÂNCIA: UMA RELAÇÃO POSSÍVEL

**RESUMO:** Este estudo faz parte de uma rede de pesquisa nacional e internacional sobre a regulamentação e qualidade da educação a distância (EaD) e tem como objetivo compreender e relacionar a e-cidadania com a qualidade como elementos importantes do desenvolvimento da garantia de desenvolvimento da EaD numa perspectiva socialmente referenciada. Para isso foi realizado um levantamento bibliográfico no repositório internacional *Education Resources Information Center* (ERIC), considerando o período 2019-2023. Concluiu-se ser relevante a inclusão da e-cidadania como um dos indicadores da qualidade socialmente referenciada na EaD, pela similitude de seus conceitos e propósitos na formação do profissional cidadão emancipado.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação a Distância; e-Cidadania; Qualidade Socialmente Referenciada.

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#### CALIDAD, e-CIUDADANÍA Y EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA: UNA RELACIÓN POSIBLE

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio forma parte de una red de investigación nacional e internacional sobre la regulación y calidad de la educación a distancia (EaD) y tiene como objetivo comprender y relacionar la e-ciudadanía con la calidad como elementos importantes en el desarrollo de la garantía de desarrollo de la EaD en un perspectiva socialmente referenciada. Para ello se realizó un levantamiento bibliográfico en el repositorio internacional *Education Resources Information Center* (ERIC), considerando el periodo 2019-2023. Se concluyó que la inclusión de la e-ciudadanía como uno de los indicadores de calidad socialmente referenciados en la EaD es relevante, por la similitud de sus conceptos y finalidades en la formación del ciudadano profesional emancipado.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación a Distancia; Ciudadanía Electrónica; Calidad Socialmente Referenciada.

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#### NOTES

1 - Partial result of a study carried out as part of the research project "Quality and Regulation in the Context of Open, Flexible or Distance Education in Brazil and Latin America", directed by Daniela da Costa Britto Pereira Lima and coordinated by Professors Daniela da Costa Britto Pereira Lima (UFG), Maria Luisa Furlan Costa (UEM) and Lilian Giotto Zarus de Medeiros (UFRN), with the support of Unirede.

2 - Original quotation: "em processos que envolvem clareza dos objetivos, processos decisórios coletivos/colaborativos dialógicos e democráticos, estabelecimento de mudanças para desenvolvimento da modalidade, processos de acompanhamento e avaliação, utilização de tecnologias de forma crítica, emancipatória e que vise a inclusão digital, tanto no que diz respeito à acesso quanto formação" (LIMA; ALONSO, 2021, p. 35).

3 - Original quotation: "O que me parece fundamental para nós, hoje, mecânicos ou físicos, pedagogos ou pedreiros, marceneiros ou biólogos é a assunção de uma posição crítica, vigilante, indagadora, em face da tecnologia. Nem, de um lado, demonologizá-la, nem, de outro, divinizá-la".

"Nunca, talvez, a frase quase perfeita - exercer o controle sobre a tecnologia e pô-la a serviço dos seres humanos - teve tanta urgência de virar fato quanto hoje, em defesa da liberdade mesma,

sem a qual o sonho da democracia se esvai” (FREIRE, 1992, p. 133).

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