## Experiencing Remote Teaching and Supervising Undergraduate and Graduate Students in two Public Brazilian Universities: challenges and possibilities

*Experienciando o Ensino Remoto e Orientando Estudantes de Graduação e Pós-Graduação em duas Universidades Públicas Brasileiras: desafios e possibilidades*

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**Abstract**
In this article, we narratively explore the challenges and possibilities we faced while teaching and supervising undergraduate and graduate students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic in two Brazilian public universities. By engaging in a narrative inquiry, we share stories of our personal and professional experiences lived in the context of distance education. Amid ongoing tensions and uncertainties, we discuss how remote teaching, while marked by challenges, also enabled meaningful digital interactions and opened space for empathy, inclusion, and pedagogical innovation. We also examine institutional limitations and social-technical barriers, while recognizing the transformative potential of online education. By telling and retelling our stories, we deepened our understanding of ourselves, our students, and our institutions.
**Keywords:** Teacher education; Remote teaching; Narrative inquiry.

**Resumo**
Neste artigo, exploramos narrativamente os desafios e as possibilidades que enfrentamos ao ensinar e orientar estudantes de graduação e pós-graduação remotamente durante a pandemia de covid-19 em duas universidades públicas brasileiras. Desenvolvendo uma pesquisa narrativa, compartilhamos histórias de nossas experiências pessoais e profissionais vividas no contexto da educação a distância. Em meio a tensões e incertezas contínuas, discutimos como o ensino remoto, embora marcado por desafios, também possibilitou interações digitais significativas e abriu espaço para a empatia, a inclusão e a inovação pedagógica. Também examinamos limitações institucionais e barreiras sociotécnicas, ao mesmo tempo em que reconhecemos o potencial transformador da educação online. Ao contar e recontar nossas histórias, aprofundamos nossa compreensão sobre nós mesmas, nossas instituições e estudantes.
**Palavras-chave:** Formação docente; Ensino remoto; Pesquisa narrativa.

**Narrative beginnings**

Although distance learning has been lived in many countries, some Brazilian teachers have struggled with the possibility of living the remote teaching experience during the pandemic (COVID-19). In this paper, we share our stories while teaching and supervising (under)graduate students within the remote mode landscape. Considering the narrative inquiry (Clandinin; Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007), we narratively tell and retell our professional and personal experiences along the remote term lived. Considering the metaphorical three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry we puzzled ourselves: How would remote teaching be within the different online place? How would interaction take place within our remote social landscape? How could remote time be lived? How would distance education experienced teachers live the remote context?

**Beginning with our stories**

In this section, we begin with our own lived experiences, which were meaningful for our reflections and understandings of our conception of distance learning and teaching. First, Dilma tells her story as a Master student while getting to know what distance education could be, followed by Viviane's narrative of experience about the time she was a grade 6 EFL teacher.

My history within the distance learning and teaching landscape started around 1996 when I was still doing my Master studies. At that time I could hardly believe distance learning could be a trustful possibility in our country because at that time I mistakenly understood the teaching and learning process was mainly related to lecture classes as the experiences I have lived as a student. My distrust with distance learning was also a result of my knowledge about some historical, financial, social and educational policies of my country. How could we live the distance learning landscape if the results of our traditional educational system were not successful? How could some students and teachers use technologies if sometimes they could not even afford buying books? Those were some of my wonders at that time. But even so I decided to enroll in an online Research Methodology Course. In the beginning of the course I realized my dial-up internet connection wasn't good enough and as a result I faced some difficulties such as accessing it, downloading and uploading files and tools needed. Then sometimes I felt like kicking the computer and giving up. But as the classes went by, and

through my interactions with the course material and activities besides the other students and instructors, soon I understood the way online courses worked. As a student I was supposed to write a research proposal alongside the other students, and each course activity provoked us and provided us with tools and resources which helped us to achieve our goal. That was the way I woke up to the possibility of constructing knowledge by living a distant learning experience.

Since that time, I have used technologies in my teaching practice whenever it is possible. Moodle, Google Classroom, Facebook Groups, Edmodo, and other digital tools have been part of my professional and personal experiences. But then the 2020 educational year arrived, and COVID-19 got into our lives. So, everything has changed in my country and all over the world with the lockdown and the death of so many people. In my university, we spent months (from March to the end of July) discussing and trying to find ways to cope with the new reality. Because it is a public university, society pushes us to return to our undergraduate and graduate classes/courses. Then, after a set of meetings and debates, the staff came to the conclusion that the university would live the experience of a "special term" in which a few courses could be remotely offered. Although I had some experience in distance learning I wondered... Would my students have good internet access? Considering many people had been fired since the pandemic started, I wondered: are they still employed? Are they emotionally, technologically, and financially prepared for the so-called "special term"?

At the same time, at another Brazilian university, Viviane also wondered about her teaching experiences to live by:

In 2014, I was an English as a Foreign Language teacher for a sixth-grade class in a public school in Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Early in the school year, I read a note in the class logbook stating that teachers of class 6E should send assignments to a student who would deliver them to Lowise, a classmate who was on medical leave. Concerned, I went to the school's office to learn more and was told that Lowise was undergoing cancer treatment and couldn't attend classes or be in contact with many people. I thought: I have a student who can't come to school, so I'll have to bring the school to her. Determined to connect her to the classroom, I looked her up on Facebook (the most widely used social network at the time). I found her profile and immediately sent her a message introducing myself as her new English teacher, along with a friend request. In that first message, I sent her two links: one to

the book "Ish", and another to a video of the alphabet sung by celebrities. I told her she could work on the Ish activity alone or in a pair, online. In March 2014, Lowise replied to my message on Facebook, and we began communicating through Facebook and Skype. Although she couldn't attend school due to medical treatment, she joined our Edmodo group and participated in all activities. I adapted my lessons to include her, creating materials that helped both her and my in-person students. She created an avatar, wrote her profile, and shared her work online. For her final project, she painted a T-shirt with the phrase: I love cupcakes. I love to make cupcakes. Her mother, Larissa, told me how meaningful those remote lessons were - they made Lowise feel capable and connected. Lowise's story showed me how powerful remote teaching can be. Teaching Lowise taught me to see my students with more empathy and to believe in their voices, wherever they are.

Looking back at my English as a Foreign Language classes in 2014, I recognize that those experiences lived with the children were an opportunity to learn more deeply how I viewed learning and how I designed learning environments - one that could make room to all students.

I became aware that serious and long-lasting conditions affect many parts of a student's life. It influences their self-image and relationships with peers, teachers, administrators, and family. Sometimes, it led to behavior problems and made achieving goals more difficult - if we keep a conservative view of the teaching and learning process, a transmission model. I built a bridge between the school and the hospital, through digital technologies, so the students did not feel depressed, powerless, or excluded, at least during our classes. I learned how to deal with children who do in-center hemodialysis or have medical appointments, or have frequent medical issues. First, I kept in mind that they deserved nothing less than my very best efforts to create spaces so they could learn English and be part of our community.

We established a relationship through the Internet, using Edmodo, e-mail, WhatsApp, Facebook, Kingsmead Eyes Speak, Domo Animate, Strip Generator, Bitstrips, Photo Peach, Little Birds Tales, Keep Calm-o-matic, eduCanon, Skype, Voki, Other voices poetry, Teacher scholastic, aipoem, ettcweb, Poetry 4 kids, and Real life English. Students interacted through those digital tools, read various texts of many different genres that were available on the Internet, and produced their own.

The way some students did their tasks in the computer lab drew my attention. Sometimes, they took a leading role when engaging in our class activities, helping their classmates or sharing new ways of learning. Sometimes, they loved to walk through the computer lab and talk to classmates, always willing to help them do the assignments, and thus changing the landscape of a computer lab where all the students were supposed to be sitting and quiet.

This story is about Viviane's experiences with technological contexts, when her grade 6 students built, with her, a bridge between classes and students who could not attend classes. Later, as a teacher educator at a public university, with the pandemic and the fact that she had to teach and learn through remote modes, those experiences she lived at school helped her to plan the courses and to supervise graduate and undergraduate students.

Based on our beginning stories of learning the possibilities of distance learning, we wondered how our professional knowledge could help us to face the challenge of remote teaching within the pandemic moment. What new challenges and possibilities could we live in that moment? In this paper, we share our stories to live by while teaching and supervising graduate and undergraduate students within the remote mode landscape. Having in mind the theoretical and methodological perspective of narrative inquiry (Clandinin; Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007) we narratively tell and retell our professional and personal experiences along the remote term lived.

**Some theoretical and methodological aspects**

We take narrative inquiry as developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Clandinin (2007) as the main basis of our narrative study, taking into consideration the perspectives of personal and professional knowledge (Clandinin; Connelly, 1995). We understand the experience told and retold in this paper might help us to better understand our construction of personal and professional knowledge we could construct by living the experience of distance teaching and supervising during the "special term" taking place during the second semester of 2020.

Our field texts were composed from March to December of 2020, along the experiences we lived with our graduate and undergraduate students from two federal universities in Brazil. Field texts were composed through journal entries, online records of our

interaction with our students, and through narratives we wrote along the experience we lived.

**Brief history of the online teaching landscape in our country**

Academically speaking, and considering specifically the field of Applied Linguistics, one can find some studies on the use of technologies for educational purposes developed since the 1990's. Collins, a professor from the catholic university of São Paulo, was one of the first researchers from the field to develop some study on this subject, and one of the first ones to publish papers, chapters and books related to the topic. For example, in 1998 she delivered an oral presentation on distance language learning via communication network (Collins, 1998). From 1998 to 2006, Collins carried out a research project on 'interaction and motivation in distance learning via the Internet. From 2000 to 2006 she worked on a new research project entitled 'Applied Linguistics in Digital Contexts', and from 2007 to 2010 she investigated the following subject: 'Teaching, mediation and teacher education in online context'. Professor Collins published several papers and books, besides supervising many PhD. and Master students on the same subject: teacher education and distance learning.

Another special Brazilian name related to the same field is professor Vera Menezes Oliveira Paiva, from the federal university of Minas Gerais. She has recently retired, but she still develops some research in the field of Applied Linguistics, and publishes very often. Her first research project related to online learning was proposed in 1997, and it was about English teaching mediated by computer. Since then professor Vera Menezes has carried out several research projects on this subject: 'E-mail: a new discursive genre' (2001-2003);' Language social practices mediated by technology' (2008-2013); 'The research on language and technology (2010-2011); 'Facebook: an ecological virtual community (2013-2016); 'Digital technologies for the development of english oral skills' (2014-2018); 'Lalintec: an ecosystem for the producing and publicizing of research on language and technology' (2017); 'Tecnobiographies: social practices history about language mediated by technology' (2018 - still in progress), and other research projects related to different topics. It seems important to highlight two extension projects proposed and developed by professor Vera Menezes, considering that both are well recognized in our country: 'Taba Eletronica' and 'INGRED', both related to English teaching and other issues. In 2001, Professor Vera Menezes published her first two papers related to technology: 'E-mail and the English language acquisition' (Paiva,

2001), and 'The WWW and the English teaching' (Paiva, 2001). Still in 2001, she published her first book on the topic: ' Interaction and learning in virtual environment' (Paiva, 2001), among several other books, chapters, and papers published along her academic life.

Yet in the field of Applied Linguistics in our country there are some other researchers and publications about technologies within the areas of language teaching and teacher education, such as the papers published in journals: Leffa (2005, 2009, 2012, 2018, 2020), Coscarelli (1999; 2000; 2002; 2017; 2019), Braga (2018, 2007), and books: Leffa (2019), Coscarelli (2017, 2016, 2005), Ribeiro (2018, 2016), Souza (2007, 2009, 2012, 2018), and Telles (2009),  among many others.

We brought some of our Brazilian authors from the field of Applied Linguistics and teacher education as a way of telling that we do have studies on distance learning in our country. On the other hand, this constructed knowledge generally does not arrive at our public and private schools, and even at some of our universities. In most of our public and in some private schools, students do not have access to good technology and internet access. In some cases, the traditional lecturing way of teaching does not allow students and teachers to live a different story. Most of our teachers, professors, students, and society in general do not trust distance learning education. In order to carry out our narrative research and to write this paper, we had to consider the national story we have lived, as far as the use of technologies at educational institutions and distance learning is concerned.

Besides those studies, and considering the pandemic moment, it is necessary to discuss the concept of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) in contrast to Distance Education (DE). Braga, Martins and Racilan (2021) offer a broader understanding of how technology, policy, and pedagogy intersect in the Brazilian educational context during the pandemic.

The authors discuss the concept of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) as a response to the global educational crisis caused by the covid-19 pandemic, emphasizing the need to distinguish it from Distance Education (DE) as defined in Brazilian legislation. Drawing on UNESCO (2020), the authors recall that the pandemic represented the greatest disruption in education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners worldwide. In Brazil, as in many other countries, government authorities and educational institutions adopted ERT as an emergency strategy to mitigate the effects of school closures. However, they stress that ERT, although it shares some characteristics with DE, cannot be considered a regular modality

of education, since it lacks the specific structure, accreditation processes, and pedagogical planning that define formal Distance Education under Law 9.394/1996 and Decree 9.057/2017. Rather, it constitutes a provisional and exceptional solution authorized in emergency contexts, as foreseen in Article 32 of the Brazilian National Educational Bases and Guidelines Law (LDB).

They also argue that ERT represents a temporary change in teaching and learning practices, not a fully developed educational model. Unlike courses that are designed from the start to be online, ERT emerged as an improvised response to crisis circumstances, forcing teachers and institutions to adapt rapidly and often without adequate preparation.

In the Brazilian context, Braga, Martins and Racilan (2021) highlight that despite several governmental initiatives to provide technological resources (such as distributing tablets or creating computer labs), these efforts rarely included sustained investment in teacher education for the pedagogical use of such technologies. As a result, inequalities in infrastructure and professional development have deepened the challenges faced by teachers and students during the pandemic. The authors also discuss the process of technological normalization in education, emphasizing that the integration of digital technologies is not a neutral or automatic process, but rather a culturally situated one that involves multiple interacting agents (teachers, students, technologies, and institutions).

The challenges of remote education in Brazil were intensified by longstanding social and economic inequalities. As Tagata and Ribas (2021, p. 401) point out, Brazil is "a country still plagued by great social and economic inequities. One example of such inequities is the digital divide made evident by the pandemic crisis, during which public school students and teachers who cannot afford high speed Internet have been struggling".

Having in mind the ideas presented in this section regarding social inequalities, technological access, and the challenges of emergency remote education, we start to tell our experiences with remote teaching and supervision during the pandemic. Inquiring into the stories and retelling the moments of tension allows us to discuss not only the opportunities digital technologies provided, but also the uneven realities faced by teachers and students, the institutional constraints, and the social, political, and emotional dimensions that composed these experiences.

**Telling and retelling of our remote teaching/supervising experiences during the pandemic**

I was outside of my country when the pandemic arrived… That moment was very difficult for me because I was afraid of getting sick and dying without seeing my family members again. But fortunately, my tickets to return to Brazil were bought, and I arrived home in the middle of March. Soon, the classes at my university would start, and a discussion took place about whether we would start the university year or we would postpone it. Since the beginning, I felt like going for a distance learning possibility, and I thought that could be the right time to bring some contribution to our society, having in mind the knowledge some university professors/researchers have constructed in the field of online education. On the other hand, I wondered… If we choose to live an online educational experience, how is our neo liberal government taking it? Considering some political and social forces wishing public universities to be closed or turned into private institutions, I wondered if our choice could push us all to a dangerous place… However, even taking the risk, I understood our students had the right to study, if they wanted, and so we could propose online courses.

The subject was democratically discussed from March to July of 2020, and by the end of July, it was decided our university year would be divided into two periods of 9 weeks to begin on August 10th, and we could use any online environment and/or tools for our teaching experience. According to the university council, instructors would have the right to decide whether they would plan and offer their courses or not. I decided I would.

The university decision process was one of the first challenges we lived during the pandemic experience. In one side we, professors, were being accused by the society members of getting our salaries and not teaching, although we were normally working (supervising our students, participating in every institutional meeting, writing papers, writing educational projects and policies we were in charge of, organizing online conferences and lectures, besides many other academic and administrative activities in which we were involved. So, our second challenge was to 'demonstrate' to everyone that we were not making our money without working…

It took some time to decide we should start our university year in an online mode because in the beginning, all of us thought the pandemic would come to an end soon, but soon we realized it would not. Even so the majority of professors declared they were not

prepared for an online teaching, and some wondered if students were able to attend our remote classes considering their financial, psychological, healthy and personal conditions during the pandemic. So the lack of online teacher and students education was our fourth challenge to deal with.

Finally, almost four months after the beginning of our discussion, those in charge of coordinating undergraduate and graduate programs got together in an extra meeting and decided the university would offer two special terms with nine weeks each, and the first one was supposed to start by August, 10th. As a consequence, like all professors, I had just a few days to plan and prepare my course at MOODLE, the online environment I chose to teach my course on Applied Linguistics and Additional Language Teaching. That could be considered another challenge, but I also considered that as a possibility. A new and different possibility of teaching pre-service language teachers, and a different story of education could be lived during that hard pandemic time.

Professor Viviane has also struggled with some experiences she lived at her university.

In March 2020, the undergraduate classes at the university where I work started. I was responsible for the English 3 course, with 23 students (future English language teachers) in the Language Major. In the first two weeks of the course, we had classes about the use of digital tools to teach and learn an additional language, about anxiety in language learning and an activity in partnership with an English Teaching Assistant from the United States about leading an interactive read-aloud experience. The students participated in the construction of the course plan, the methodology and the forms of assessment that we would adopt throughout the school semester.

Two English Teaching Assistants from the United States would stay in our city until November of that year. One of them proposed activities which aimed at teaching the English language to children, and I was glad that the students would have the opportunity to add this experience to their curriculum.

However, two weeks later, the coordination of the English Teaching Assistants Project demanded the immediate return of the assistants to the United States, and my university council suspended the academic calendar. At that moment, I felt the strength of the pandemic and started worrying about organizing my professional life while working from home. In addition to that undergraduate course, I would also teach in a graduate program

that I was also in charge of coordinating. All of the master's defense committees started taking place online, and the secretary started home office working.

Working groups were created to decide what emergency remote education would be like, and I composed the graduate group. After many meetings and consulting the students, it was decided that teaching would be voluntary; that is, if the student or teacher were unable to join remote education, they would not be obliged to.

The biggest challenge for our university and for the graduate program I coordinated was that the university was new, and we were a small group. The university had become independent from the main campus only one year before the pandemic, and there were many departments still to be created. The government had not delivered on the initial promise to hire new staff, and we were very overwhelmed. That was the case of a Distance Education Center, for example, which we did not have, and which would be essential to give us institutional and technical support for remote education. Another challenge was the students who could not afford what they would need to follow the remote teaching.

On May 11, 2021, a friend sent me a video of Rupi Kaur performing her poem Broken English. I immediately imagined so many possibilities for working with that video that I suggested to a master's student I was supervising at the time that she use the poem in her teaching practicum lessons with my undergraduate English 3 students. I also invited a professor from Canada, along with my friend, who teaches at a Federal Institute in Uberlândia and was the one who sent me the video, to join us for a conversation about the poem Broken English. On June 10, 2021, we held the class via Google Meet. It was a very rich moment, with a lot of interaction, conducted entirely in English. Some Brazilian students shared the undergraduate research projects they were developing, and we discussed Broken English, reflecting on issues of language, identity, and belonging. The poem sparked personal connections, and students talked about their families, their own experiences with language learning, and the emotional weight of speaking in a language that is not their own. I understand that that class would never have been possible without digital technologies. The Canadian professor wouldn't have traveled from Canada to Brazil, and my friend wouldn't have made the trip from Uberlândia to Catalão either.

However, not all teachers lived the experiences with digital technologies as I did, according to the narrative beginning I told in the Introduction section. For me, it was not a

problem to plan the courses I was in charge of, being aware of the methodology - one which promotes different types of interaction - among students, between teacher and students, and between students and course content, considering collaborative learning principles. I was also aware of the pedagogical challenges inherent in distance learning that needed to be considered when planning the courses. I had been facing the challenge of encouraging colleagues to open up to the possibility of remote education and to remain strong, even surrounded by friends and family members who were sick, or had died, due to covid-19. But despite all those challenges, I understood, and still understand, that distance education provides a lot of good opportunities for not only reaching those who cannot be face-to-face, but for increasing the quality of the teaching and learning processes.

As Tagata and Ribas (2021) point out, the transition to remote education during the pandemic was marked by deep inequalities in access to digital tools, connectivity, and working conditions, which made it impossible for many teachers and students to participate in similar experiences. In this sense, my experience with the Broken English class should be understood not as a general rule, but as one among many uneven realities shaped by privilege, preparation, and access to technology. Braga, Martins, and Racilan (2021) explain that most teachers had to learn to use digital tools through experimentation, since there was no time for systematic training or planning.

From this perspective, the Broken English class opens up a space not only for exploring the potential of digital technologies to create meaningful intercultural learning encounters, but also for understanding the profound asymmetries that defined teaching and learning during the pandemic. The reconfiguration of time, space, and interaction enabled by digital platforms opened up a new educational terrain, one that emerged precisely from the conditions of emergency and improvisation that characterized the period.

**Conclusions: still in the midst…**

As we inquired into the experience of remote teaching in our universities during the pandemics, we understood the challenges we lived were part of the process of constructing personal and professional knowledge about ourselves, about our staff and about our students and maybe mainly about our institutions. It seemed we were all living the liminal space experience. We also understood we were living the experience of continuing education, considering what we were and the way we used to work in non-online courses,

and what we were becoming besides the way we were momentarily transforming our traditional classroom courses into remote ones. In short, we can say all the challenges we faced ended up becoming possibilities for learning, for inquiring, and for development.

Our study can significantly offer some contribution not only for narrative inquirers but for all professionals interested in distance learning. It can also help pre-service students to get a sense of what might be the teaching experience in a remote mode during disturbing times as the pandemic one. We, both authors, came to better understand the stories of our institutions, of our students and of ourselves, and it probably can bring some social and institutional understanding of what our public universities and its staff do.

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