

## Original Article

# The place of autonomy in distance education

*O lugar da autonomia na Educação a Distância*

*El lugar de la autonomía en la educación a distancia*

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## Abstract

The growing demand for enrollments in Distance Education (EaD) in recent years implies the need to rethink the role of the teacher and the student as well. In this sense, this investigation aimed to reflect on EaD regarding the need for autonomy on the part of students. To this end, qualitative research was carried out, with a descriptive and bibliographical bias. The results indicate that autonomy must be at the center of the distance teaching process and must accompany the entire course of the construction of the student's learning, thus allowing autonomous and active learning.

**Keywords:** CIAED 2023. ABED. Autonomy. EaD. Teaching and learning process.

## Resumo

A crescente demanda de matrículas na Educação a Distância (EaD)

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nos últimos anos implica a necessidade de repensar o papel do professor e do aluno. Nesse sentido, esta investigação teve como objetivo fazer uma reflexão sobre a EaD no que diz respeito à necessidade da autonomia por parte dos alunos. Para isso, realizou-se uma pesquisa qualitativa, com viés descritivo e de cunho bibliográfico. Os resultados indicam que a autonomia deve estar no centro do processo de ensino a distância e deve acompanhar todo o percurso da construção da aprendizagem do aluno, permitindo assim uma aprendizagem autônoma e ativa.

**Palavras-chave:** CIAED 2023. ABED. Autonomia. EaD. Processo de ensino e aprendizagem.

## Resumen

La creciente demanda de matrículas en educación a distancia (EaD) en los últimos años implica la necesidad de repensar el papel del docente y del alumno. En este sentido, esta investigación tuvo como objetivo reflexionar sobre la educación a distancia en relación con la necesidad de autonomía por parte de los estudiantes. Para ello se realizó una investigación cualitativa, con un sesgo descriptivo y bibliográfico. Los resultados indican que la autonomía debe estar en el centro del proceso de enseñanza a distancia y debe acompañar todo el transcurso de la construcción del aprendizaje del estudiante, permitiendo así un aprendizaje autónomo y activo.

**Keywords:** CIAED 2023. ABED. Autonomía. EaD. Proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje.

## 1. Introduction

As Barreneche already observed in 2003, Distance Education (DE) "has proven to be one of the platforms for expanding access opportunities to higher education in our country, presenting proposals of quality and pedagogical excellence" (Barreneche, 2003, p. 2). This mode of education has shown rapid growth, according to data from the Brazilian Association for Distance Education (ABED), in the analytical report on distance learning in Brazil (Censo EaD.BR 2018/2019). Between 2017

and 2018, there was a growth of 21%, with the number of enrollments jumping from 7,773,828 to 9,374,647 (ABED, 2019). In fully online courses, the number of enrollments increased from 1,320,025 to 2,358,934.

This report also indicates that the growth of DE is not only occurring in fully online courses but also in blended learning courses. According to Fonseca (2022, p. 13), "one of the reasons for this growth is the use of digital technologies in the courses offered at a distance, as well as the flexibility of location and time, characteristics of this mode of education." This is also noted by Fornari *et al.* (2017, p. 476): "technology has motivated significant changes in education, such as the propagation of Distance Education."

The CensoEAD.BR 2019-2020 (ABED, 2020) indicates that Higher Education Institutions are advancing in hybrid teaching through the offering of distance courses and the flexibilization of the academic schedule in educational pathways, making instructional materials available in virtual environments for either virtual or face-to-face delivery.

Thus, it can be asserted that access to and use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICT) are indispensable, both for Distance Education (DE) (the focus of this study) and for blended learning, given the advancements and impacts they have on the teaching and learning process. These impacts necessitate changes in educational habits and practices, both on the part of students and teachers, who need to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning.

"With all this development, DE emerges as an educational modality with great potential, enabling the demand for education in Brazil" (Velho & Pinto, p. 2, 2015). For these authors, there are also "issues that need to be addressed when it comes to DE, where students in these processes need to demonstrate specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes."

In this regard, Grossi (2020) notes that DE is a well-structured educational modality designed for an adult audience, which has always had technology as an ally, currently the DICT. Among various skills that this adult audience needs to have to be a student in DE, autonomy stands out. According to Moore (1980), the student needs help to exercise autonomy, that is, to be self-directed and confident in building their own

learning. Paiva (2006 as cited in Fonseca, 2022, p. 36) supports this notion by stating that "for the student to be successful in their learning process, essential skills such as self-discipline, self-motivation, responsibility, and the ability to manage their own time and regulate their learning process are necessary." For the author, autonomy is:

A complex socio-cognitive system that manifests in varying degrees of independence and control over one's own learning process, involving capabilities, skills, attitudes, desires, decision-making, choices, and evaluation both as a language learner and as its user, inside or outside the classroom (PAIVA, 2006, p. 88-89).

Therefore, "autonomy is a process that is based on various experiences of deciding, for no one is autonomous first in order to then decide, and no one is the subject of anyone else's autonomy" (SILVA; PEDRO, 2010, p. 77). In this context, the question arose: what is the role of autonomy in the teaching and learning process in Distance Education (DE)? To answer this question, research was conducted aimed at reflecting on DE concerning the need for autonomy on the part of students.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Distance Education (DE) and Autonomy

For Behar (2009, p. 2), DE is "a form of organized learning, which is primarily characterized by the physical separation between teacher and student and the existence of some type of technology-mediated interaction between them." Legally, in Brazil, DE is defined by Decree No. 9,057, of May 25, 2017, in its Article 1, as a modality of education:

In which the didactic-pedagogical mediation in the teaching and learning processes occurs with the use of information and communication technologies and means, with qualified personnel, with access policies, with appropriate monitoring and evaluation, among others, and develops educational activities by students

and education professionals who are in different places and times (BRASIL, 2017, *on-line*).

Although the Brazilian law recognizing Distance Education (DE) as a mode of education dates back to 1996 — the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education (LDB) No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, which in its Article 80 clearly defines the initial criteria of DE — this mode of education had already been offered for many years. Thus, Fonseca (2022, p. 28) observes that "DE has come a long way since its inception in the educational field." The author clarifies that "this teaching and learning model has evolved into the online learning mode, which occurs over the internet, where teaching and learning happen within a virtual environment." In this sense, the author believes that the development of digital technologies is one of the reasons driving the growth of DE.

Thus, "it can be observed that Distance Education (DE) is always associated with technological aspects, and each generation is characterized by the dominant technologies of its time" (GROSSI; LOPES; BAIA, 2023, p. 80). The current generation uses "more digital resources, such as hypertexts, audio, videos, animations, aiming at collaborative learning and high interaction between students and teachers" (GROSSI; LEAL, 2020). Therefore, it is expected that these participants will have diverse skills and competencies related to technological mastery (BEHAR, 2013), such as:

- \* Digital literacy, which refers to the criticality of information and the use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (TDIC).
- \* Enhanced cooperation through social interaction, primarily occurring in virtual learning environments. On this matter, Rangel *et al.* (2012, p. 554) state that "in terms of building networks for collaborative learning through learning processes, the potential of Distance Education (DE), developed through a model open to participation, is, above all, inviting to interactivity and autonomy of the individuals."
- \* Social presence in the way the DE participant perceives themselves immersed in virtuality.

- \* Autonomy in decision-making.
- \* Organization of space and time.
- \* Communication or ways of expressing oneself through technologies.

These competencies are crucial for the Distance Education (DE) student, "who is perceived as having a more adult and mature profile, bringing experiences and knowledge, with their social experiences and professional background influencing the way they interact in their studies" (PEREIRA, 2015, p. 15). According to the EAD.Br Census 2018/2019, students who opt for fully online courses are typically between 26 and 30 years old.

Corroborating with Pereira (2015), the data presented indicate that this audience is adult and already integrated into the workforce, thus bringing experiences and life lessons that enable them to take responsibility for their learning process. Although this adult audience demonstrates some autonomy for individualized study in DE, according to Palloff and Pratt (2004), the virtual student, who is enrolled in online courses, needs to have access to a computer, a modem, and an appropriate connection for browsing, and must be autonomous, prepared for studies, and ready to engage.

These skills and competencies are fundamental in shaping the profile of an adult and mature student, "who brings experiences and knowledge, with their social life and professional experience influencing how they interact in their studies" (PEREIRA, 2015, p. 15). Among these skills and competencies, autonomy stands out as essential for students to manage their own learning process (BELLONI, 2008). Maia and Mattar (2007) also emphasize the importance of autonomy for DE students:

Distance education thus demands an autonomous and independent learner, more accountable for the learning process and willing to engage in self-directed learning. With the shift in learning culture, the study has become self-managed and self-monitored by an autonomous learner (MAIA; MATTAR, 2007, p. 85).

Neill (2018) adds to this understanding by stating that in Distance Education:

A course that emphasizes a focus on the student (attitude, experience, cognition, and learning styles), reclaims and encourages their responsibility for learning, promotes their engagement, and enhances their interaction and thus, tends to ensure greater success for those who participate (NEILL, 2018, p. 55).

For Holanda, Pinheiro, and Pagliuca (2013, p. 410), "the autonomy granted to the student assigns them a more active role in the construction of shared, meaningful, and contextualized knowledge." Thus, the presence of autonomy in the profile of the Distance Education (DE) student can also be observed in the competency wheel proposed by Velho and Pinto (2015) (Figure 1). It is worth mentioning that these competencies are classified by degrees of difficulty: those in green are basic competencies, those in yellow are intermediate, and those in red are competencies that are difficult to develop.

**Figure 1 – The Wheel of 12 Competencies**



Source: Velho and Pinto (2015, p. 6).

According to Figure 1, autonomy is considered a basic competency. This underscores the need to "prepare students for distance learning by building their autonomy, forming competencies that make them committed to their learning through Digital Information and Communication Technologies (TDIC), and stimulating their participation" (PALLOFF; PRATT, 2004 as cited in FONSECA, 2022, p. 37).

Magalhães *et al.* (2020, p. 5) concur with this viewpoint by stating that "the TDIC have propelled the process of student autonomy in their learning." In addition, "Distance Education amplifies stimuli and challenges for the practice of curiosity, which aids in the construction of student autonomy" (SILVA *et al.*, 2016, p. 136).

According to Palloff and Pratt (2004), there are several factors that can influence the development of autonomy positively or negatively: the individual characteristics of the learner and the teacher; the educational environment; the institution; the materials; political and social contexts; and even the technology used. Belloni (2008) points out that the student needs to display skills such as self-management, problem-solving, adaptability and flexibility in the face of new tasks, being responsible, learning independently, and working in a team, within a collaborative and supportive environment.

Fonseca (2022, p. 40) states, "these skills allow teachers to maximize the potential of technologies in teaching," with the teacher acting as a mediator, aided by TDIC and a team of professionals, such as tutors, instructional designers, among others. Thus, "emphasis on the issue of autonomy demands from students skills that are often non-existent in most distance learning students, but that can be acquired with dedication, interest, and commitment to their studies" (FONSECA, 2022, p. 22), noting that autonomy is directly related to autonomous learning.

Belloni (2008 as cited in FONSECA, 2022) suggests that "in the process of autonomous learning, the student is not an object or product, but an active subject who carries out their own learning and abstracts knowledge, applying it to new situations." Hence, "to recognize autonomy in the teaching and learning process means to understand that the other



is capable of managing their processes and assuming responsibility for their own education" (FONSECA, 2022, p. 33).

### 3. Methodology

In this investigation, a bibliographic research of the state of knowledge was chosen, with a qualitative approach and an exploratory type, which was carried out using the cooperative electronic portal of scientific journals SciELO. The research was conducted in the first semester of 2023 and had three stages:

**1st stage:** selection of articles published on the theme, which followed the following steps:

1st) Search for articles published between 2020 and 2022 on the cooperative electronic portal of scientific journals SciELO, using the following descriptors: autonomy and DE; autonomy and Distance Education.

2nd) Exclusion of articles: that appeared repeatedly in the search; that were not in Portuguese; that, although they appeared in the search, were not related to the theme of the present research.

**2nd stage:** reading of the articles selected in the 1st stage.

**3rd stage:** presentation of the analyses made of the selected articles.

### 4. Presentation of Data and Analysis

**1st and 2nd stages:** The search for articles resulted in a total of 39 articles. However, 21 articles were excluded from this research: six appeared repeatedly in the search, three were not in Portuguese, and 12 were not related to the theme of the research. Therefore, the total number of articles selected for analysis was 18.

**3rd stage:** The reflection made in this study on DE in terms of the need for autonomy on the part of the students, as "participation in collective virtual spaces means assuming responsibility in the construction of one's own knowledge" (HOLANDA; PINHEIRO; PAGLIUCA, 2013,

p. 410). Silva *et al.* (2016, p. 137) consider it important for "the exercise of the student's autonomy to indeed be capable of organizing to determine their own pace of study-learning."

The authors also recall that "this is not an easy task, as it goes through a cultural and evolutionary construction, consequent of an educational praxis even before their arrival at higher education" (SILVA *et al.*, 2016, p. 137).

This leads to an understanding of the importance of active and individualized learning, and of social presence for the enhancement of autonomy, which is built through students' experiences in their social relations (BARRENECHE, 2003). Given that societal transformations demand new requirements, and education plays an important role in this process, it is a challenge to rethink the way education is delivered in order to reach the learning society (FONSECA, 2022).

Consequently, there is an increasing interest in having more appealing educational experiences, creating opportunities for engagement, motivation, and challenges, thus providing students with a continuous state of learning, protagonism, and the enhancement of autonomy (ALMEIDA, 2020). This leads to active learning (MORAN, 2018), which is associated with reflective learning, where the student understands all the processes involved.

For Fonseca (2022, p. 42), "the way a student perceives their own presence, which is greater in DE, or that of their peers, interferes with their action and communication, and consequently, with their active learning." Gunawardena (1995) defines this perception as social presence in the context of DE, "which involves the degree to which the subject is recognized in technology-mediated relationships" (FONSECA, 2022, p. 43).

It can be said that "active learning occurs when the teacher challenges their students to move toward a learning purpose, performing tasks, answering questions, and seeking solutions (DOLAN; COLLINS, 2015 as cited in FONSECA, 2022, p. 43), having "a pedagogical model supported by the theory of interactionist learning" (WANDER; GOMES; PINTO, 2020, p. 3), in which the student is at the center of the teaching and learning process and the teacher acts as a mediator of that process.

For Almeida (2020, p. 10), "it is almost a mandatory task for educators who wish to truly provide more meaningful learning experiences, and not merely mechanical ones." Holanda, Pinheiro, and Pagliuca, (2013, p. 410) remind us that DE should "promote a learning that is significant and more independent, and student autonomy as a critical subject for the construction and updating of their own knowledge."

Thus, "active methodologies promote a learning environment that enables the construction of knowledge and autonomy, as the focus of the teaching and learning process is entirely directed at the student" (FONSECA, 2022, p. 44). In this regard, Silva and Pedro (2010, p. 77) believe that "in order to develop the autonomy of their students, educators need to carry out activities that stimulate decision-making."

Therefore, "adopting active methodologies presupposes that the involved teachers, through pedagogical mediation, stimulate the protagonism and autonomy of students in the individual and collaborative learning process" (PASCUM, 2022, p. 2). Thus, both the autonomy and the flexibility allowed by DE "must enable the student to follow an individualized path, reading itineraries of curricular materials and study, the sequence of activities, the choice of alternative activities" (FORNARI, 2017, p. 484). From this understanding, it is clear that learning is established in three hybrid movements:

1st) The individual construction, in which each student chooses their own path. In individualized learning, the autonomy of the student, their initiative, and active participation in the process are essential (FONSECA, 2022). Because "the primary responsibility is each one's own, of their initiative, of what is planned by the school and of what the student builds in other spaces and times" (MORAN, 2018, p. 42).

2nd) The group or shared construction, which occurs through the countless possibilities of connection between people, whether distant or close, with or without tutoring, but that are in grounded contexts (MORAN, 2018). For the author, it is necessary that:

Develop some strategies so that peer learning is successful and can help learners expand the worldview they have developed on individual and group paths, leading

them to new questions, investigations, practices, and syntheses (MORAN, 2018, p. 48).

**3rd)** The tutorial, where learning is guided by the teacher or tutor. On this point, Grossi, Costa, and Santos (2013) state that the role of the tutor and their interaction with the students is fundamental for the construction of knowledge. "It is worth noting that not all tutors have extensive experience and training to perform such a function, being often merely content deliverers and intermediaries between the students and the institution" (FONSECA, 2022, p. 47).

Fonseca (2022, p. 45) also emphasizes the "need to rethink a set of factors that interfere with student learning, and in the action of the teacher/tutor, so that learning actually occurs in an active and effective manner." The author compiled Table 1 with the skills necessary for the development of pedagogical practices that can favor the learning of the DE student.

**Table 1 – Necessary Skills for the Development of Pedagogical Practices in Distance Education**

Methods	Necessary Skills	Moodle Practices	Teacher Practices
Enhancement of Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Decision-making, responsibility for one's actions.</li> <li>* Capacity for argumentation, dialogue, information and experience exchange.</li> <li>* Clear and objective communication, proposing ideas and solutions.</li> <li>* Critical and reflective thinking.</li> <li>* Digital literacy, criticality concerning information and the use of digital tools, mastery of digital tools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Facilitate mediation by technologies/ technological resources between teacher-student, student-student.</li> <li>* Provide diverse and flexible tools.</li> <li>* Provide technical support.</li> <li>* Organize content and activities in a systematic, high-quality, diverse, and easily accessible manner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Mediatize, promote dialogue and interaction in the learning environment.</li> <li>* Discover each student's potential.</li> <li>* Present facts.</li> <li>* Assist in the search for information.</li> <li>* Stimulate logical reasoning in students.</li> <li>* Promote the use of media and digital platforms as a means of communication and sharing knowledge.</li> </ul>

Individualized Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Self-discipline.</li> <li>* Self-motivation.</li> <li>* Responsibility and ability to manage one's own time.</li> <li>* Regulation of one's learning process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Facilitate mediation through technologies/ technological resources between teacher and student.</li> <li>* Access to media asynchronously.</li> <li>* Organize content and activities into paths of individualized learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Promote assertive pedagogical strategies for each learning style.</li> <li>* Understand the realities and experiences of the student.</li> <li>* Monitor the individual process of each student.</li> <li>* Consider the characteristics, strengths, and challenges of each student.</li> <li>* Adapt the curriculum.</li> <li>* Promote respect and empathy.</li> <li>* Value differences.</li> <li>* Provide feedback on performance.</li> <li>* Develop the potential of the student.</li> </ul>
Active Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Desire and interest in learning.</li> <li>* Initiative in one's learning process.</li> <li>* Reflection on one's learning.</li> <li>* Setting goals and objectives and determining how to achieve them.</li> <li>* Constant pursuit of new learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Offer flexible learning paths.</li> <li>* Facilitating tools and features that support group work, such as forums, wikis, and collaborative document editing, to encourage teamwork and enhance learning through peer interaction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Foster student agency.</li> <li>* Promote engagement.</li> <li>* Keep students motivated.</li> <li>* Pose problems and foster solutions.</li> <li>* Create collective pedagogical practices.</li> </ul>

Fonte: Fonseca (2022, p. 47).

It is evident from Table 1 that to assist students in enhancing their autonomy, a set of skills is required that can be acquired through the correct pedagogical practices chosen by teachers, which can be implemented in Virtual Learning Environments, such as the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle). In this context, Ferreira *et al.* (2022, p. 2) highlight "the potential of virtual learning environments to enhance the teaching process and stimulate students' autonomy."

Fonseca (2022, p. 46), in this Table 1, also aims to demonstrate an "increasingly effective educational path that acts to facilitate active learning of the student, whether individualized, group-based, or through

tutoring." Moreover, upon examining Table 1, it is clear that:

The greatest interest lies in the need to promote activities that motivate the development of skills and attitudes in individuals, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and creating conditions for students to reflect, analyze, synthesize, classify, categorize, and enhance their autonomy, becoming autonomous in their learning process, proving that the act of learning is unique and individual (FONSECA, 2022, p. 47).

To conclude, while acknowledging the importance of pedagogical mediation and understanding that the concept of autonomous learning involves dimensions of self-direction and self-determination (BELLONI, 2008), it is worth recalling the words of Moore (1980, p. 22): to be successful in Distance Education (DE), a student must have "competence as an autonomous and self-directed learner." Additionally, teaching should not be limited to merely informing the student but should also stimulate the autonomy of learning (MAGALHÃES *et al.*, 2020).

## 5. Final Considerations

At the end of this study, it was possible to answer the question that initiated it: what is the role of autonomy in the teaching and learning process in DE? The answer is: autonomy should be at the center of the distance teaching process and should accompany the entire course of the student's learning construction, thereby allowing for autonomous learning.

It becomes necessary to consider various aspects that involve the construction of this autonomy, beyond the student's interactions with their learning process. The teacher's perspective and the pedagogical practices used are essential to ensure active and meaningful involvement, enhancing the skills and development of autonomy. However, Rangel *et al.* (2012, p. 551) reflect on the many "difficulties for learning autonomy: the ability to manage time; planning; self-direction and self-motivation."

Therefore, DE students, to understand all the processes involved in their academic journey, need to demonstrate various skills, which are

listed in Table 1. These skills will assist in the enhancement of their autonomy, and consequently, lead to autonomous learning, "which must be imbued with self-reflection, i.e., the ability to think about oneself and the skill of critical self-perception as a learner" (GONDAR, 2017, p. 14).

By studying DE with a focus on the profile of its students, one can conclude that it is essential for these students to have autonomy, which in turn, leads to an understanding of the importance of active and individualized learning and social presence for the enhancement of autonomy, remembering that "the active and autonomous posture expected from a DE student is not only possible but can be encouraged" (WANDER; GOMES; PINTO 2020, p. 9).

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