

RECONFIGURING A TEACHING & LEARNING CENTRE TO SUPPORT THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE TEACHING: INSIGHTS FROM THE IDEA CENTRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINHO

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ABSTRACT

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic required higher education institutions to rethink the delivery of education. The University of Minho in Portugal developed a rapid transition to online education. The IDEA Centre (Centre for the Innovation and Development of Teaching and Learning) had an important role in supporting teachers in this transition. This paper describes the centre's primary actions and presents evidence of their success in terms of reaching the teachers. Formerly the centre had focused predominantly on face-to-face teaching. Swiftly, the centre created initiatives supporting teaching and learning in the digital world. Initially, the centre developed social network channels (Facebook page and Twitter profiles). Shortly after, the centre started to deliver an electronic bulletin - IDEAdigital - for the dissemination of tools and strategies to assist online teaching. To foster dialogue, peer-support and sharing of experiences, the centre organized a weekly online informal event - "Sharing IDEiAs" – to promote discussions around teaching and learning online. Support for the use of active methodologies with digital technologies was delivered through flipped webinars, in addition to a one-time webinar on alternative assessments.

The use of social networks was quite successful, especially Facebook, with a high number of impressions, reach and engagement. The participants' evaluation of Sharing IDEiAs was positive, emphasizing relevance as a space for listening to colleagues and learning about methodologies and technologies. In terms of lessons learned, it became clear to the academic community and to the IDEA Centre that planning and training for the use of technologies in teaching is strategically necessary not only in the short-term, but also to consolidate hybrid education models in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all sectors, from economy to education. It was estimated by April 2020 that around 1,7 billion students had been affected by the closure of classroom activities in 192 countries (UNESCO, 2020), with possible effects on interpersonal relationships, evasion and increased social inequalities, in addition to the difficulties generated by the need to move to remote education, requiring greater autonomy and self-determination by teachers and students (Castaman & Rodrigues, 2020).

In Portugal, the pandemic situation started in mid-February. In the beginning of March, the first case was diagnosed in a student at the University of Minho. In this scenario, the role of the administration was to quickly assess the situation and propose measures to avoid further contagion, as well as to ensure the continuity and quality of educational activities through the so-called 'emergency remote education' (Moreira, Henriques & Barros, 2020), here referred to as online teaching. Confinement and closure of face-to-face activities took place on March 8, putting teachers and students in great expectation of what was to come.

The IDEA Centre – Centre for the Innovation and Development of Teaching and Learning <https://idea.uminho.pt>, which already had a strong role in teacher training and innovation since 2017, assumed a central role to support the transition to online teaching, together with GAE (Teaching Support Office) and the Dean of Student Affairs and Pedagogical Innovation. This transition should take place in the best possible way, since it always requires some degree of planning and experimentation, namely as regards the use of digital technologies that may not be part of the daily lives of teachers and students, thus implying the development of their digital skills. Although our institution has a platform that can be used for distance education, face-to-face education prevails. Therefore, having to move suddenly to online teaching was a huge challenge.

Online teaching requires a new understanding of teaching and learning processes, and how digital tools mediate them and impact communication and knowledge building (Farrel et al., 2019; Laurillard, 2012; Ní Shé et al., 2019). In our context, many concerns emerged in a few weeks, such as:

- How to respond to diverse disciplinary needs?
- How to choose the best digital tools for good quality learning?
- How to quantify the workload and avoid overload?
- How to motivate students and humanise online relationships?
- How to develop and stimulate collaborative learning?
- How to evaluate and guarantee equity and integrity?

These and other issues became part of the daily life of the academy, which, to a certain extent, caused insecurity and also uncertainty about the future. This situation reinforced the need for support measures, along with mechanisms that make online partnerships possible, both intra-institutionally (teachers-students-staff) and inter-institutionally.

IDEA CENTRE ACTIONS

Before the pandemic, the IDEA Centre worked mainly on training and project support activities, maintaining a website, a blog for communities of practice and communication by email.

The team quickly changed its way of working and new forms and channels of interaction took shape, with the creation of a Facebook page and Twitter profile, also used for the dissemination of online teaching practices and materials regarding the use of digital technologies. Social networks are increasingly attracting the interest of educational institutions, encouraging a break from traditional models of teaching and learning, driving changes in education and relationships (Manca, 2019).

Shortly after, the production of IDEAdigital bulletins began (1 to 3 pages documents), containing synthetic and direct tips, ideas and recommendations for teachers and students about online teaching and learning.

After three weeks of confinement, concerns and instability increased and the team felt the need to create an open and informal space for dialogue, focusing on the transition to online teaching. Partilhando IDEiAs/ Sharing IDEiAs (the Portuguese word 'ideias' stands for 'ideas') started as a weekly meeting (Wednesdays, 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.), allowing for joint reflection on issues and experiences, with a significant participation from teachers, but also students, other staff, and invited senior managers.

Three weeks after Sharing IDEiAs began and in order to enhance training, online training sessions were conducted using the flipped webinar model. Pre-session videos on various technologies and strategies were provided, followed by a meeting (Zoom) where details and examples of applications in real contexts were presented and discussed with participants.

In addition, a specific webinar on alternative assessment methodologies was held with the collaboration of Geraldine O'Neill (University College Dublin - UCD, Ireland).

Higher education institutions will most probably have to adopt a blended learning approach in the next academic year. The Centre's team, together with other teachers from UMinho and teachers and collaborators from the University of Aveiro, have prepared an online training programme on blended learning to take place in July 2020 (Docência+ / Teaching+), aiming at the development of teachers' digital competencies and the design of course plans for 2020/2021 in both institutions.

LOOKING AT THE ACTIONS

During the initiatives, some data was collected (from March 15 to June 25) so as to grasp the reach, engagement and perceptions of participants on their importance:

1. Facebook statistics: users, likes, views, impressions, reach and engagement;
2. Twitter statistics: tweets, impressions, engagement, profile visits, mentions, new followers;
3. Sharing IDEiAs: post-session evaluation survey;
4. Community: campus evaluation survey;
5. Dialogue with course coordinators.

As regards data from social networks, it is important to define the following concepts:

- Posts: Publication containing text and media;
- Tweets: Twitter publication, up to 280 characters, with text and media;
- Reaction: Indication of reaction feelings in posts, with icon;
- Impressions: Total frequency that posts appear on users' screens;
- Reach: Estimated users who saw the publications on the screen at least once;
- Engagement: Total estimated users who took action on posts (clicks, reactions, sharing, comments);
- Mentions: Indicates when a profile is mentioned by another on Twitter.

Facebook

The creation of the page was one of the strategies for reaching a wide audience and being able to disseminate materials (like IDEAdigital), Sharing IDEiAs meetings, training sessions (Flipped Webinars) and other actions, materials and events from third parties that could help teachers transition to online teaching. In just ten days there were 500 followers, later reaching 918 (25-06-20). The statistics presented in Table 1 refer to users in 25 countries:

Portugal (76.5%), Brazil (17.5%) and other countries (6%).

Month	Likes	Views	Engagement	Impressions	Reach
Mar	7525	1,232	1,140	11,675	5,748
Apr	20,685	610	944	13,241	7,633
May	24,036	769	1,263	16,026	9,381
Jun	21,565	342	499	6,940	4,868
Total	73,811	2,953	3,846	47,882	27,630
Monthly average	18,453	738	962	11,971	6,908
SD*	7,422	373	335	3,806	2,012

* Standard deviation

Table 1 - Summary of @Ideaminho page statistics on Facebook (15-Mar-20 to 25-June-20).

Likes on the IDEA page stood out (73,811), as well as impressions (47,882), with a high reach (27,630). A lower number of reach than impressions was expected, as the same user could have multiple impressions.

Engagement (3,846) must be evaluated together with impression and reach, as it is not enough to reach the user, it is important that he reacts in some way with the post to materialize the interaction. This does not imply that the post had no impact on those who only saw it on the screen (impression), but it was probably low.

Despite being a new page, it presents expressive and growing data, which indicates the importance of this channel for increasing the potential impact of other actions within the community during the pandemic.

It is worth noting that the posts with the highest reach and engagement were those related to IDEA group actions, that is, something involving the activities of IDEA Centre or the community, such as the post about planning Docência+, the online training programme under preparation in collaboration with the University of Aveiro. This post reached 1,646 users, 248 clicks and 87 reactions (335 engagements). There appears to be greater engagement when people see more use for it or, as in this case, see themselves as part of the post, adding affective value to the reactions and encouraging users to get involved.

Another highlight was in the post about one of the Sharing IDEiAs's meetings, motivated by the initiative "Skills 4 post-Covid - Skills for the future", addressing the challenges and opportunities for universities in the context of the resumption of teaching activities. Regarding this post, it is believed that there was great interest and anxiety by the academic community in knowing what would come in the new semester, generating a 1,216 reach, with 33 engagements.

Twitter

Together with Facebook, a Twitter profile was created as a strategy to expand communication channels. Although Twitter is not the most used channel in 2020, it still has many users, and the strategy was to adopt both channels to increase reach and engagement.

The growth of followers occurred more slowly, reaching 102 users (May 25), in addition to 325 followed users. The data from Twitter analytics (Table 2) indicate expressive number for a new profile (just a few months).

Month	Tweets	Impressions	Engagement	Profile visitors	Mentions	New followers
Mar	24	5072	164	325	13	29
Apr	37	7276	248	269	49	30
May	28	5931	257	136	27	15
Jun	25	5556	152	163	14	21
Sum	114	23835	821	893	103	95
Monthly average	29	5959	205	223	26	24
SD*	6	946	55	89	17	7

* Standard deviation

Table 2 - Summary of @Ideaminho profile statistics on Twitter (15-Mar-20 to 25-June-20).

From 114 posts, 23,835 impressions and 821 engagements were obtained, indicating that the strategy of using Twitter was important.

Similarly to Facebook, posts that updated people about news about an IDEA action, and with some indication for the future, had a greater impact on dissemination; in this case, the same Facebook post about planning the programme Docência+ was the Tweet with the most impressions (768).

IDEAdigital

Up to June 25, 20 bulletins (short informative texts) were produced and, despite the main focus being on teachers, several focused on a wider audience, including students and other academic professionals.

The bulletins covered: strategies for online teaching; online assessment; synthesis of some Sharing IDEiAs; digital resources; study management and online work; creation of digital materials, including adaptations for students with special education needs.

Bulletin 17 involved working with students through a partnership established with AAUM (Academic Student Association of UMinho), and from then on the editorial team includes a student so as to bring the students' visions and perceptions into materials production.

Sharing IDEiAs

Sharing IDEiAs was conceived as an informal, dialogic space, mostly directed at our community but open to all audiences (not just UMinho), aimed at fostering productive conversations based on the participants' concerns and experiences. For each week's session, a few guiding questions were sent to enrolled participants; in the session, after a brief introduction, the participants discussed the questions in breakout rooms with assigned moderators. The moderators' role was to mediate dialogue and take notes on main ideas which were then shared and discussed with the whole group.

There were 11 Zoom sessions of around 1:30 hours each, focusing on issues regarding online teaching, learning and assessment, with an average of 91 people per meeting, and a total of 998 participants in all, many of whom attended several sessions. At the end of the fourth session, a short survey was launched to monitor the usefulness of this initiative.

With 38 respondents, on a scale of 1 (not useful) to 5 (very useful), 53% indicated 5 and 39% indicated 4, that is, the sessions were helping people. But how? The vast majority mentioned that they had a space to listen to the ideas and experiences of others, in addition to being able to reflect on online teaching and learn about digital tools. The general perception, including the team's, was that the sessions developed a sense of not being alone and a realisation that many others were encountering the same problems, which may have soothed anxieties by increasing a sense of belonging to a community that shares concerns and seeks solutions collaboratively.

Flipped Webinars

This action focused on training for online teaching in the format of flipped webinars related to active methodologies and technologies with immediate applicability, organized with the collaboration of teachers who had explored them. Seven webinars took place: Audience Response System (ARS); Collaborative writing; Digital concept maps; Distance Team Based Learning; Padlet; PerusALL; Ted-Ed.

Teachers accessed a previous (short) video and participated in a synchronous session where the facilitators presented real examples and fostered collective reflection on how methodologies and technologies could be re-contextualized in other course units.

Global perceptions

To determine the teachers' perceptions on the usefulness of the various actions taken to support the transition to online teaching, a survey was launched in May 2020. Teachers from 10 faculties out of 11 answered the survey and 73 responses were obtained. The results, presented in Chart 1, refer only to respondents who indicated their participation in the actions.

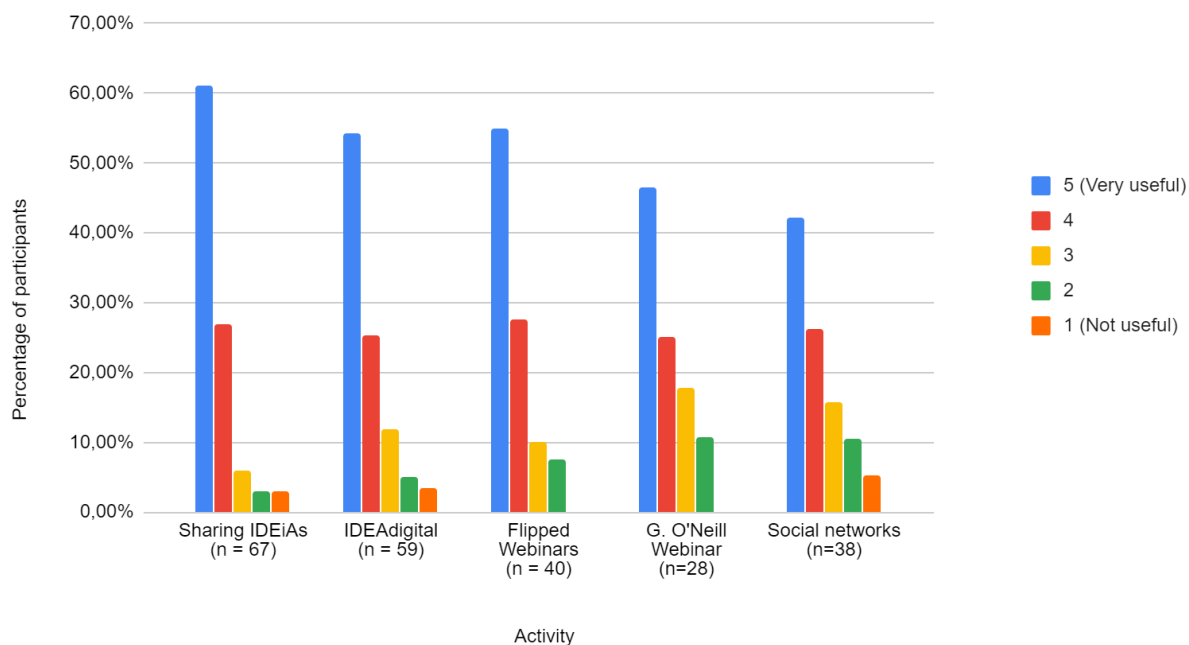


Chart 1 – Community's perceptions of the usefulness of actions for the transition to online teaching.

Overall, all actions were positively evaluated, mostly in the scale points 4 and 5, especially Sharing IDEiAs, IDEAdigital and Flipped Webinars, corroborating the teams' perceptions and the data on engagements and reach obtained from social networks.

The respondents' reasons focused primarily on socio-affective aspects related with the humanization of relationships, being able to listen to one another and feeling supported (Sharing IDEiAs), and also on the importance of materials and training sessions for developing competences on how to explore new educational tools and strategies in their teaching.

The course coordinators presented similar ideas, emphasizing that "We are remedying and if we want to face it in a more lasting way, we need to restructure, plan for b-learning".

CHALLENGES AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reality will no longer be the same after this unsettling yet transformative experience. There have been innovations and professional learning, demanding great effort and resilience to advance new ways of organizing and carrying out teaching and learning, and of developing virtuous relationships as human beings.

The use of social networks expanded the possibilities of communication, providing digital tools for dialogue, interaction, interactivity and quick sharing. Dialogic spaces also proved to be vital for supporting teachers and students, accompanied by materials and training sessions to facilitate the transition to online teaching.

Efforts cannot stop and the key to maintaining quality education at the university depends on strategic planning and the community's engagement at all levels. This is the path that the IDEA Centre will continue to walk, reusing, recreating and transforming the actions carried out in this critical period, so that new forms of teacher development and educational innovation can flourish through the integration of digital technologies in student-centred methodologies, regardless of delivery modes and levels. A greater focus on students' perspectives and learning outcomes will be necessary to monitor change and improve practice on a continuous basis.

We learned that distance is irrelevant in the virtual world, and that intra/inter-institutional relations can create ties and projects that strengthen not only our university, but the academic community as a whole, because together we are capable of much more.

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