From Xerox to Zoom: Brazilian universities during the coronavirus pandemic
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Abstract
Transmission of knowledge in Brazilian universities has been largely shaped by a Xerox culture of rapid reproduction of text, one that sits suspended between the print book and the Internet. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic disrupted the use of established means of communication in Brazilian undergraduate classrooms and forced higher education institutions to confront their concepts of education. Many Brazilian public universities stopped classes altogether and only resumed them online by mid-2020 or even later in the year, after much deliberation. This research examines how university officials responded to the new demand to implement remote teaching in their institutional and communicative contexts. Analyzing the very rich public and official statements produced by a set of prestigious Brazilian universities, this research reveals the ways in which the quarantine both challenged and mobilized the deepest values of the country’s higher education institutions. The goal of this research is to understand how a rigid communication culture, in which the values and histories of the institutions are crystalized, made adaptation to new teaching conditions very difficult. It presents a fascinating case where knowledge, media and institutional culture intersect in a moment of crisis.

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Introduction
Why did many large, prestigious Brazilian research universities, among the top Latin American institutions in various international rankings, take many months to start undergraduate classes online when, in March
2020, the coronavirus pandemic prevented on-campus classes? The sudden transition to online classes presented practical challenges for all faculty, students and staff around the world, but in Brazil institutional and cultural challenges coalesced to make the decision to go online a lengthy and complicated one.

This research will examine how senior university administrators, which in Brazilian public universities are chosen among senior faculty members of the institution, dealt with the academic demands of the quarantine. Administrators in prestigious Brazilian public universities and in top private higher education institutions navigated the complex web of meanings of on-campus classes and online education, mobilizing the most cherished values of their institutions to justify their decisions. In official documents and declarations, administrators conveyed the dilemmas that they faced in bringing the academic community together around a particular path in those complex conditions.

Brazilian public universities are tuition-free institutions which have played a large role in the democratization of education in Brazil. More than two million undergraduate students are enrolled today in public universities in Brazil (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [INEP], 2019). The institutions’ commitment to public service and social justice is unequivocal and in the past two decades most have adopted affirmative action programs, with excellent results and wide national support (Pessoa, 2021). Moreover, most of the research produced in the country comes from these institutions.

Brazilian universities themselves have been extensively studied, including during the coronavirus pandemic. (Neves, et al., 2021) This research contributes to the debate by placing media history and culture at the center of the analysis. Means of communication should not be seen as mere devices for the storage and transmission of information, but also as cultural artifacts that are impregnated with meaning themselves. The Toronto School deeply examined the various ways in which means of communication can disrupt old and build new social relations; the Birmingham School, in its turn, showed how means of communication themselves were social constructs. This research goes a step further by looking at the materiality of and practices around means of communication as silent but not inert depositories of old hopes and fears.

With this perspective it is possible to see why, although Brazilian universities had at their disposal sufficient technological tools to address the new demands generated by the quarantine, many of them were paralyzed in the first months of the pandemic regarding undergraduate classes. Most other academic activities were quickly converted online, including administrative tasks, research, community service (which is an important component of Brazilian public universities), and even graduate classes. However, undergraduate classes — this crucial arena where knowledge is reconstructed in front of the younger generations — were slow to resume.

Universities were stuck, it will be argued, between the culture of the book, already being left behind, and the digital culture, not yet fully assimilated. They remained in the Xerox culture of cheap reproduction of book segments, introduced in Brazil between the 1960s and 1980s, when Brazilian universities were building their core identities. Early in the pandemic, this institutional history delayed both the adoption of new means of communication and the use of old means of communication (e.g., books, mail, and written materials) in new ways aimed at maintaining interactions between students and faculty. Their identities as institutions were deeply embedded in a particular media culture, and a sudden change questioned that very identity.

Although universities faced the same challenges, they presented and dealt with them in singular ways. One of the institutions examined, a state university, privileged its status in society as a whole over potential reservations against new technologies and rapidly moved online. The two federal universities examined opted to resist the recommendation of the current federal administration, which has been openly hostile to academia, and only started undergraduate classes online after administrators managed to formally differentiate it from distance education, about which they had serious reservations. The two private non-profit institutions started online classes soon after the quarantine began, elaborating the values of quality
education and solidarity in official documentation to reinforce their choice. University documents show the richness of the university administrators’ communications and give meaning to their varying decisions.

The next section provides an overview of the history of Brazilian universities, with emphasis on the evolution of their communicative cultures that we find crucial to grasp why it was so arduous for administrators to decide how to continue classes during the pandemic. The third section presents the dilemmas encountered by senior university administrators, given the particularly rigid communicative culture they encountered in 2020. The subsequent sections examine each of the case studies, based on public official documents produced during the pandemic. They are followed by the analysis of the material and by the conclusion.

From the Xerox culture to the Internet

The cultural and institutional history that complicated Brazilian universities administrators’ decisions, which was examined as part of a larger research, is summarized here. Brazilian universities, founded in the twentieth century, had a late start compared to their Latin American counterparts (Schwartzman, 2007). That followed the very late introduction of the press in Brazil, in the nineteenth century, and also late investments in basic education (Müller, 2018). The 1960s and 1970s, years of intense growth of enrollment in Brazilian public universities and of the establishment of research and graduate programs, coincided with the popularization of cheap copying technologies such as the mimeograph and photocopying. Cheap copying was not just an efficient instrument for making the content of books widely available. It made possible the segmentation of the book into chapters and, therefore, empowered academic institutions to determine what was relevant or acceptable in each particular book.

That ideological role of the Xerox, and the organization of undergraduate courses around a series of curated chapters that received the reverence of a book, continued being powerful even after the introduction of the Internet in Brazil. While Benjamin (1968) pointed to the loss of the aura of works of art as a result of their mechanical reproduction, here such a sacred element was transferred to a new medium. When the pandemic hit Brazilian universities, their communicative culture was no longer that of the book, with its depth and solidity, nor yet of the Internet, with its density and openness. The way administrators perceived the challenge of moving online depended on how they understood the culture of their institutions and the meaning of the transformation which was about to happen.

The Internet arrived in Brazil in the late 1980s and its commercial use started in the mid-1990s. However, the Xerox concept of knowledge appropriation was still very much present during these decades, for most of the academic system. Digitalization meant that the “course packet” could fit on a flash drive, but not necessarily that it changed substantively. Students with no easy computer access still printed hundreds of pages of assigned chapters, standing in long lines in front of copy shops, much like in the 1980s. The Internet opened new possibilities for education, and students and teachers who wanted to explore them had more data, books, and articles available, as well as easier contact with peers through digital venues. In the year 2000, for instance, CAPES — Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior [Directorate for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel], the Brazilian federal agency for the support and evaluation of graduate education — secured access for all Brazilian universities a number of international academic journals, in an original and still working online system (CAPES, 2021). In spite of these developments, the class format did not change substantively: a selected assembly of relevant chapters by different authors and written exams where students proved their familiarity with the narrative presented by their professors.

During these four decades, however, the transformation of the media environment in Brazilian society as a whole has been astonishing. Although with serious inequalities, particularly economic, regional, and rural-urban, more than 80 percent of Brazilians had access to the Internet in 2020 (Cetic.br, 2022). In 2005, that
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proportion was less than 25 percent, while by then 68 percent of American adults already used the Internet (Perrin and Duggan, 2015). Of course, students and faculty incorporated new technologies into their lives, benefiting from equipment and connections either provided by universities or privately owned. Academic culture didn’t fully follow this trend, and there were reservations about the use of technologies in the classroom. The result was a dichotomy, not unusual in Brazilian history, between a dynamic social life and institutions that resisted, instead of shaped, transformations. In our case, the dichotomy was expressed in a society increasingly more connected, living in the Internet era, while still inspired by the Xerox culture, as it will be detailed in future publications.

Challenges facing Brazilian universities

That was the communicative setting of our public universities in March 2020, when the first social distancing measures against the spread of the pandemic were implemented in Brazil. In our calendar, the first semester of classes takes place between March and June and the second semester between August and December, mirroring the Northern Hemisphere calendar with respect to the seasons of the year. On campus, classes were halted nationally in March, at the beginning of the first semester, after just a few class meetings. Private institutions in general converted to online teaching in a couple of weeks, but public universities were slower to adapt, particularly in undergraduate programs. Some public universities converted in a couple of weeks, while others took many months to start classes online. This was not just a question of skills and resources, which universities provided to the faculty in the form of workshops and videoconferencing platforms. There was resistance to the conversion, with a myriad of meetings and deliberations taking place throughout the first few months of quarantine, as if something very precious risked being lost in this conversion. This resistance had its roots in the unusual combination of the flexibility of the Xerox assemblage with the hallowed aura of the book. Going massively online could reveal the course packet in its contingency and arbitrariness as a canon of the discipline.

Castonia, et al. (2021) studied the response of federal universities to needs relating to the continuation of classes in quarantine. Using data from the Ministry of Education, they found that more than three out of four federal universities were not offering undergraduate online classes as late as July 2020, some four months after the quarantine started in Brazil. This is in spite of the fact that the federal government issued regulations that allowed these institutions to convert to online classes.

The main objective reason for the delay raised by university administrators was the concern that implementing online courses would increase the disparity of education access given the lack of Internet access for a sizable part of college students. Although this was a legitimate concern, surveys done by individual institutions when the pandemic started, as well as further research, showed otherwise. Only two in every hundred students lacked Internet access at home, according to a well-designed, careful quantitative study of Internet access and college enrollment (Castonia, et al., 2021). Castonia, et al. called, nevertheless, for universities to better address and understand the needs of students for educational technologies, particularly given the fact that digital exclusion is more prevalent among disadvantaged groups.

Gusso, et al. (2020) detailed the pedagogical challenges of converting to online education, such as access to technologies, time for class planning, faculty training, as well as issues relating to the limited educational potential of online instruction. However, given that the option of meeting on campus was not available, due to the pandemic, one still should examine why universities delayed the conversion for so long. Cavalcanti and Guerra (2022) argued that the bureaucratic structure of federal universities, as well as a lack of leadership within the Ministry of Education, prevented a rapid massive conversion to online classes. But what were the symbolic and ideological motives for rejecting new technologies that the pandemic forced institutions to confront?
Case studies: Brazilian universities in the southeast

According to the most recent available data, there are 108 public and 90 private universities in Brazil. There are also 194 public smaller higher education institutions, including colleges, plus 2216 private smaller higher education institutions (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [INEP], 2019). Schwartzman, et al. (2021) proposed a classification of higher education in Brazil that identified 16 large research public higher education institutions and 78 selective private higher education institutions.

This research examined the public documentation of five top higher education institutions regarding the continuation of classes during the first months of 2020. It examined three public universities, one state and two federal, as well as two private not-for-profit institutions, one of them religiously affiliated. All these would fall into Schwartzman’s two categories mentioned earlier. Including two private universities in this research is important to give us a term of comparison for its main object of study, Brazilian public universities.

All the institutions have campuses in the large capitals of the industrialized southeast region of the country and they are the leading institutions in their own segments (state, federal, or private non-profit). That choice allows for comparison by reducing regional disparity, level of press scrutiny, student body demographics (at least among the tuition-free institutions), and funding availability (at least among the federal universities and among the private non-profit institutions).

The first institution examined is the University of São Paulo (USP), a state university ranked second in Latin American university rankings (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2022). Although heavily dependent on state funds, it enjoys substantive autonomy from the governor and the state assembly regarding its academic and financial decisions. As a public institution, it has to follow complicated legal and administrative rules. Its main campus is in the state capital, São Paulo. The second institution examined is the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), ranked third among Brazilian universities. Federal universities are also heavily dependent on federal funds, and the political and economic whims of Brasília tend to impact the daily administration, although until recently not academic life. It hosts the storied Museu Nacional, Brazil’s oldest natural history museum, and its largest campuses are in the state capital, Rio de Janeiro.

The Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) is another prestigious public institution, ranking fifth among Brazilian universities. UFMG was founded by the State of Minas Gerais, also incorporating various independent schools, and it was federalized only in 1949. It sits close to the Pampulha Modern Ensemble in the planned capital of the highly developed state, Belo Horizonte. Two private institutions were also studied. The Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) ranks sixth in the country and first as a private institution. Alongside other six prestigious Brazilian universities, it is recognized by the Vatican as a pontifical university in this country whose population is still more than half Catholic. It is a non-profit institution, but unlike its public counterparts, tuition is not free. The last institution examined is Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV), one of the top Brazilian higher education institutions, ranking among the 150 best global institutions in areas such as social policy, economics, and legal studies (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2022). With campuses in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and the capital, Brasília, it is also a non-profit institution, charging high tuition for its various programs. These are all very selective institutions, with strong research activities. They chose different paths during the first months of the pandemic, however, which should be attributed to their particular institutional designs, communicative histories and, of course, decisions made by academic officials and committees.

In order to understand the dilemmas that administrators faced in those first months of the quarantine and the different ways in which they framed them, the public Web sites of these universities were consulted, particularly the rector’s office page and other central official pages containing resolutions regarding the
pandemic during its first months, and the dean’s office page of selected schools within the public universities, usually one of the most traditional ones, founded before the university was formed, and another more recent school, for comparison. The documents used ranged from official decrees and council resolutions to public statements by the rector or the rector’s office, including statements reproduced by press offices of the universities. Attention was paid to the written style (direct or convoluted), to the addressees (students, faculty, academic community, society), and to the feelings expressed (fear, determination, compassion, pride). The interpretation of the documents makes use of a broad set of interpretative tools, including discourse analysis and psychoanalysis, particularly fields theory (Minerbo, 1997).

The University of São Paulo will not stop

The University of São Paulo (USP) created a unified Internet page for news on the pandemic, internal resolutions, and news on COVID-19 research at the university (USP, 2021). In a comprehensive article on 17 March 2020, the official university newspaper reported on a speech given by the rector to all university school deans. According to this story, the rector affirmed that USP will not stop, reminding the audience of its responsibility towards society as a public university in a moment of emergency (Cruz, 2020). In this official setting — the story includes photographs of the on-site meeting (see Figure 1) — the rector reaffirmed USP’s position as central to the country and summoned all to rise to the challenge. He needed the collaboration of deans to “keep it alive and dynamic” as decisions regarding the academic calendar and classes were made by the schools. The undergraduate provost, in the same meeting, listed a host of initiatives to support the conversion of classes to online platforms. Note that the rector’s main message, that “USP will not stop”, was in the headline of the story, illustrating the need for a strong statement to serve as a counterpoint to internal hesitations or external expectations.
Different schools within USP responded in different ways to the rector’s call, although the schools examined in this study maintained the same transparent approach in their communication to the community, keeping resolutions online and presenting forceful argumentation to back up their decisions. The Polytechnic School of the University of São Paulo (POLI) created a dedicated Internet page to inform the community about decisions regarding the pandemic (Escola Politécnica da Universidade de São Paulo [POLI], 2020b). The dean’s message, issued on the same day as the rector’s speech, 17 March, was direct. She informed that after three days in which IT staff would help faculty set up classes, classes should be normalized by 23 March; she expected the school to maintain its academic calendar (Escola Politécnica da Universidade de São Paulo [POLI], 2020a). She was very specific, giving guidelines about future exams, stressing that classes should be given online at their scheduled times, and that attendance in virtual classes was required. Attendance in regular on-campus classes is not traditionally required in POLI’s classes, and students tend to prepare for difficult exams in study groups, so the dean’s bluntness should be taken with a grain of salt. It was unequivocal, however, that this traditional and selective school, one of the original schools from which the University of São Paulo was formed, presented itself as a no-nonsense institution, with serious affairs to be taken care of, and no room for equivocations.

The series of messages by the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences (FFLCH) during the pandemic brought thoughtful considerations conveyed in careful wording (FFLCH, 2020). On 24 March, a week after on campus classes were suspended at USP, she encouraged the use of all available
teaching tools to continue activities in undergraduate and graduate programs. In the same message, she stressed the need for dialogue and mutual agreement in decisions regarding the use of online tools. On 27 March she told the community that a survey about student and faculty access and use of distance learning tools was going to be sent to them. On 1 April, she recommended that faculty keep contact with students during this period of exception and uncertainty, but reminded them that they should not feel compelled to attribute presence and evaluations that resulted in final grades. There was a fine balance between encouragement to keep classes going and a need to include the community in decision-making processes, in the form of dialogue with heads of departments and surveys. This was distinct from the POLI dean’s approach of providing guidelines to an obvious course of action, leaving solutions to possible obstacles for the moment when they presented themselves.

Finally, on 20 April, the FFLCH dean sent an official message reaffirming the values of this storied institution, reminding that the calling of FFLCH and of its undergraduate programs was intimately related to face-to-face classes, asserting that it would remain so. She rejected the adoption of distance learning education but argued for remote activities for the completion of the semester. This substitution of one stigmatized nomenclature, “ensino a distância (EaD)” [distance education], by another, “atividades remotas” [remote activities] appeared as a solution for debates within the community and heads of the various departments in this humanities school.

Announcing that classes would resume, given the unpredictability of the return to regular classes, the message distinguished remote activities, with their own characteristics, from online education, whose efficacy was not clear to the school. She reaffirmed the need for solidarity and flexibility regarding academic demands and promised support for the entire FFLCH community during those pressing times, while at the same time maintaining the 2020 academic terms, therefore presenting a continuation of classes as a product of understanding and dialogue.

It took a month for this decision to be made, while POLI and perhaps other USP schools reached the same result in less time. However, given the suspicion regarding “EaD” within the academic community, it seemed like a laudable achievement to return to classes with everyone on board, at the expense of a mere month or so of consultations, discussions, and deliberations. In any case, the messages of the FFLCH dean provide a rich and detailed portrait of the dilemmas that university administrators faced during these first weeks of the quarantine. The two schools showed, as well, that the rector’s message to the academic community, although unequivocal, had to be ratified by the schools. It is likely that schools’ decisions were also discussed and reinterpreted within departments and programs that were part of each school. In addition to USP, there are two other major state universities in the state of São Paulo; there are a total of 40 state universities in Brazil, most of them younger institutions (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [INEP], (2019), there are a total 40 state universities in Brazil, most of them younger institutions. It is quite possible that the pace with which different state universities, schools, and programs resumed classes also varied within this system, given their different cultures and challenges and the overall complicated communicative environment in the background of such decisions.

The exceptional academic period at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

The Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro [UFRJ]) is one of the two major federal research universities examined for this research. Resolution 9 of the University Council, dated 9 July, established the 2020 Exceptional Academic Period (Período Letivo Excepcional [PLE]) (UFRJ, 2021). It relied on a series of internal resolutions that regulated faculty and student activities during the pandemic and established a new academic calendar that would postpone the end of the second semester of 2020 to March 2021. The tone of the decision was quite bureaucratic and, at the same time, apologetic, as if the decision to start classes online needed both to be backed by inferior decisions and by the undeniably long and necessary quarantine period. It was presented as a non-decision, as if the university
council was stating that it had no alternative but to start online classes. It is noteworthy that the School of Medicine, one of the original schools from which the University of Brazil (Universidade do Brasil), later UFRJ, was created, managed to start online classes a few weeks earlier than the other schools.

It can be assumed that the decision to establish the PLE was reached after various meetings and discussions within the university community, but its traces are not as clear as they are for USP. The Web site of the School of Architecture (Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo [FAU]) included a gloomy letter from the rector, dated 23 March, stressing the need for UFRJ to prepare for a fight against the coronavirus (Carvalho, 2021). The letter stated that expectations for illness and death were somber, implying that classes were secondary to the priority of saving lives. It also suggested that a suspension of classes would be dealt with in the same way as in the past regarding long strikes, which are quite common in public universities. The social role of the university, as well as the role of technological innovation for the well-being of all, appears in the letter, but the continuation of undergraduate classes was set apart from this battle towards a world of solidarity and inclusiveness. After a couple of weeks of regular classes in March 2020, UFRJ suspended its undergraduate classes until August, like many Brazilian federal universities. It then offered four months of supplementary activities, resuming the first semester of 2020 only in late November, according to data provided by the Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação [MEC], 2022).

The description of the PLE appeared on the Communications School (Escola de Comunicação da UFRJ [ECO-UFRJ]) Web site, as it was adapted by that school. The period was not a continuation of the academic calendar, which was still suspended. Students could suspend enrollment without any penalties, and there would be no minimal class attendance. It presented the PLE as a period of experimentation with new tools and methods where normal teaching actives were optional for faculty and students (Escola de Comunicação [ECO], 2020). Comparing to USP, one can see that the path taken by UFRJ was longer and less clear, with some schools eager to start classes earlier, and others allowing students and faculty to suspend their activities to even later. Like FFLCH-USP which took pains to differentiate EaD from remote activities, UFRJ created a distinct terminology for the period of online education, setting it apart from the regular academic calendar. The very idea that these institutions would offer online classes during the pandemic was to be avoided, in spite of the fact that their other activities were maintained.

The UFRJ rector presented a community under siege, forced together to defend itself from harsh conditions. One wonders how difficult the discourse of defending lives must have been for those faculty members who wanted to keep their undergraduate classes online. She attempted to bring the community together based on a feeling of fear, not fortitude. Needless to say, this does not mean that these academic communities as a whole endorsed the calls of the rector, given their sheer size and immense faculty diversity. Public universities, and particularly federal universities, were indeed under attack by the country’s president, who has shown symbolically and through concrete measures his despise for knowledge and culture (Galvão-Castro, et al., 2022). That political context might have played a role in shaping attitudes regarding online classes.

We have to bear in mind, also, that most graduate programs in public universities resumed classes online much earlier than undergraduate programs and that, like at UFRJ, hospitals and other social services provided by universities continued serving the community as a whole. During this major public health crisis Brazilian public universities as a whole had a tremendous role in medical and epidemiological research, as well as in the examination of economic, social, and psychological impacts of the pandemic (Rosa, et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, while many universities were bringing undergraduate education to a halt, they were also continuing their research as well as community services. Brazilian scientists, particularly women, teamed up with international counterparts in various research projects (Lopes, 2021). They were also a fixture on television and other media, explaining to the public each new discovery about the disease and its transmission. These scientists gave much needed guidance in a period of uncertainty and apprehension that was made worse by deliberate misinformation produced by many federal authorities. That active role made the suspension of undergraduate classes even more striking, leading us to believe that there were more profound communicative blockages that prevented universities from taking a pragmatic view of online education.
Engineering in action at the Federal University of Minas Gerais

The Federal University of Minas Gerais (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais [UFMG]), another prestigious research federal university, created a page for public announcements regarding the pandemic situation (UFMG, 2022). On 20 March 2020, the university committee for undergraduate affairs recommended that UFMG undergraduate teaching do not substitute face-to-face classes with digital classes, given it was not possible to guarantee equal treatment for all students. The committee bluntly stated that teaching done in disagreement with these instructions should not be considered official. This was a harsh rebuttal of the Ministry of Education’s recommendation to continue classes online, sending a strong message to faculty members who might have been inclined to continue teaching (UFMG, 2020).

On 15 June the rector and vice-rector issued a note to the university community referring to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, the need for broad involvement of the academic community and respect for its committees’ decisions, as well as measures for academic inclusion and adaptation to remote education. The note reminded its readers that UFMG is guided by a belief that education is a right and by its commitment to quality and inclusion and reflected on the need of the academic community to face together a moment of uncertainty and loss, political instability, and lack of resources (Almeida and Moreira, 2020). The decision to resume classes was made only after various committees endorsed it, but the note still has an apologetic tone, as if this decision was a concession, only conceivable due to the long period of quarantine. After a couple of weeks of regular classes in March 2020, UFMG suspended its undergraduate classes and resumed the first semester of 2020 in August, according to data by the Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação [MEC], 2022). That was roughly what happened in other prestigious federal universities as well, such as the Federal University of São Paulo (Universidade Federal de São Paulo [UNIFESP]), Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul [UFRGS]), and the University of Brasília (Universidade de Brasília [UnB]).

On 9 July the university released a resolution that regulated emergency remote education for undergraduate courses at UFMG during the COVID-19 pandemic (Conselho de Ensino, Pesquisa e Extensão da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2020). Again, the new nomenclature — “ensino remoto emergencial (ERE)” [emergency remote education] — saved the day, justifying the use of technology during quarantine. It defined ERE as a teaching regime temporarily adopted to develop curricular academic activities with pedagogical mediation based on digital information and communication technologies. It is interesting to note, however, that the problem was the conversion of regular classes into the online model, which would have revealed the Xerox model in all of its entire scope. The documents examined for this research have not presented a substantive discussion about a return to less technological forms of communication, such as using paper, books, or the post, to sustain classes in the first months of the pandemic. It appears that classes were to be taught in the traditional format regardless of the conditions. Any change required new nomenclature. For example, keeping libraries open with solely curbside service or assigning readings and tasks not demanding much interaction could have appeared as alternatives, given the assumption that students did not have the proper tools for online classes. Assigning readings from books, however, would have presented the same communicative challenges as represented by an online conversion: it would equally call into question the frozen Xerox-based education, moving backwards, so to speak, instead of forward, demanding an equally demanding review of educational practices, perhaps even more so than a move online.

It is interesting to note a statement made by UFMG Engineering School (EE), another traditional institution dating back before the creation of the university as a whole, regarding the suspension of classes. The note, “Engineering in Action: New Coronavirus — Covid-19,” is telling. Issued on 14 April, it seems to address society as a whole, providing a detailed account of all of the activities that the school was engaged in since classes were suspended, from maintenance personnel who were taking care of buildings to IT staff who
were maintaining local Internet servers; from indispensable meetings to dissertation defenses; from ongoing research to community service projects. It provided in detail a series of initiatives regarding the fight against the pandemic in which EE faculty, including the study of the presence of the new coronavirus in sewage systems, development of mathematical models for hospital bed availability, and a series of projects involving the development of personal protective and hospital equipment. The message was clear: the School of Engineering, including students, faculty and staff, was making its contribution in the fight against the coronavirus, regardless of the status of undergraduate classes.

The dean had a message for students not in regular classes during this period. He recommended that students follow the example of Isaac Newton who, secluded in his family farm due to the bubonic plague that ravaged England in 1665, proposed an impressive array of scientific innovations (Escola de Engenharia, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 2020). It is somewhat quaint that the current dean of the School of Engineering would use the example of a seventeenth century British scientist to inspire the students, given the fact that communicative technologies 350 years later easily allowed for students all over the globe to continue their education. However, if you put this message in the institutional context of Brazilian public universities, it gains forcefulness: the dean was sending a specific message to students that they have an important academic task in front of them, of self-care, study, and service in spite of adversity. It was a more empowering message to students and faculty than the one sent by the rector a month before, which seemed to assert the university’s institutional power both against the central government and members of the academic community inclined to keep their classes going. This esprit de corps was undeniable in the end of the message, when the engineering dean remarked, paraphrasing a touching popular Brazilian song, that they will be back to the ring.

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**Quality education at the Getulio Vargas Foundation**

Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) presented straightforward information directed to students on the pandemic and its effects on campus. An English version of a note probably published in the first weeks of the pandemic informed of the suspension of on-campus classes and of an adoption of synchronous technology and online material to support classes. These steps, according to the note, would enable FGV “to get through the quarantine period ... without any reduction in the quality of students’ services” (FGV, 2021). A series of questions and answers regarding library use, confirmed viral cases in the community, and other practical topics followed. The statement conveyed the idea of a centralized and smooth decision-making process by informing students on the state of affairs and plans for the near future. In a more recent version of the note, “quality” and “technology” appeared in bold letters (FGV, 2022).

Regarding different schools within FGV, the dean of the Applied Mathematics School (Escola de Matemática Aplicada [EMA]) issued a note detailing the guidance of the institution, stressing the safety of the community and a continuation of classes with technologies (Escola de Matemática Aplicada [EMAp], 2022). A note by the Economics School of São Paulo (Escola de Economia de São Paulo [EESP]) followed the same line, adding that Zoom and other digital platforms had been largely used by FGV since 2016 (EESP, 2022). There was no trace of questioning the decision of continuing classes, let alone using technologies, which was portrayed as usable and useful tools.

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**Solidary at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro**

Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro [PUC-Rio]) presented an organized and thorough series of resolutions issued by the rector and provosts regarding
COVID-19 and classes on its Web site (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro [PUC-Rio], 2022). A first note issued on 18 March 2020 about the continuation of academic activities stated that the platform for virtual learning environment, already in use for all courses, would be used for remote classes. It was touching that the note included a call for solidarity, calling for students to help their colleagues with less robust access to the Internet, but not surprising given that compassion is one of the pillars of Catholicism (Ratton, 2022). Two academic departments did not provide pandemic-related information, giving an impression that decisions were made in a centralized fashion.

It is also noteworthy that PUC-Rio affirmed that it is attuned to what its counterparts were doing around the globe in search for best academic practices during the pandemic. Neither public universities in this study nor other private universities mentioned this in the documents examined, although FGV issued public statements in English, conveying an awareness of its global position. It is quite possible that locating Brazilian institutions in a larger universe of higher education institutions, as PUC-Rio have done, would have facilitated the dialogue and decision-making processes regarding the continuation of classes. This could have helped institutions take a more pragmatic approach, freeing themselves from institutional, communicative, and ideological chains that made the transition to online classes difficult and time-consuming.

Analysis

The analysis of official documents and announcements produced by top Brazilian universities during the first months of the pandemic regarding the continuation of undergraduate classes online showed unambiguously that this matter was contested. Some universities took many months to resume classes in an online format, only when they found appropriate terminology to distinguish new teaching practices from a stigmatized “EaD” [distance learning]. Those institutions that managed to quickly convert to online classes summoned their most cherished values to support their decisions, using solemn although often baroque language. Even the practical FGV messages referred to its values of quality education and advanced methods, perhaps not to justify decisions, which was unnecessary, but to assure students that decisions were based on solid measures and considerations.

The continuation online of a host of other academic activities, even in institutions which suspended classes, such as graduate classes, administrative work, various official meetings (many of them devoted to deciding what to do regarding classes), dissertation defenses, research projects, and so on, illustrated that there was something very specific to the academic formative mission in teaching younger students, disrupted by the quarantine. This is consistent with the view that Brazilian public universities have a historically rigid relationship towards communication and knowledge, a product of their institutional histories and the history of the country as a whole. An online departmental meeting to discuss online classes might not be subversive, but giving online classes would question the entire way in which knowledge was meant to be understood by a younger generation.

Senior university administrators encountered different institutional settings and values, which they had to engage in their speeches and texts. The context of federal universities was particularly difficult, given tremendous hardships encountered under the current federal administration, which was not so much the case for São Paulo state universities, which have more financial autonomy and enjoy a more respectful relationship with the governor. For private institutions, dependent on tuition, the continuation of classes was a must. Two documents stand apart among the ones analyzed in this research, for their ability to weave together educational goals, values of the institution, concerns about an online transition, courage in the face of uncertainty, and a general tone of respect for the academic community as a whole. These were the 20 April note by the dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP) and the 18 March message by the provost for academic affairs of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio).
These leaders showed an awareness not only of the material potential and limits of their institutions, but also the symbolic constraints that were magnified by this unprecedented crisis. Particularly at FFLCH-USP, where the decision-making process to resume classes could have dragged on longer, it seems that skillfully addressing the possible concerns regarding online education while at the same time calling on the higher values of the institution had a calming effect on the community. Fears that online conversion was a surrender to unreasonable political or economic demands that could have threatened the very identity of the institution appear to have been quelled by a skillful articulation that reaffirmed the identity of the institution. For the present reader, the document unravels the intricacies of institutional values and beliefs in a way that most of the other documents, stressing one side or another of the equation, do not. This stands as a lesson for future crises: it is necessary to engage in dialogue with the fears and concerns of a community instead of fighting them head-on or, even worse, succumbing to them thoughtlessly.

Theoretically, this research pointed out the importance of a deeper understanding of communicative histories and practices of institutions in order to make sense of their current dilemmas and responses. The present use of means of communication embodies forgotten and unexamined past beliefs and ideologies and the analysis of the latter can give meaning to the former. In our case, understanding the complicated role of the book in Brazil and of the Xerox copy in Brazilian universities can show how the meaning of these means of communication shaped current relationships between faculty, students, and knowledge. Any quick change in the educational communicative setting destabilized the very core of educational activity.

Conclusion

It is not known yet if the experience of two years of quarantine and online teaching will foster a new assessment of the relationship between means of communication, knowledge, and education in Brazilian public universities. According to Faoro (1975), Brazilian patrimonial culture is skilled at minor adaptations to new conditions which keep the essence of institutions unchanged. It is a possibility that the academic Xerox culture will survive in the labyrinth of twenty-first century digital culture. However, it is also possible that this massive transition, even if symbolically guarded by different terminology and institutional framing, will create conditions for more flexible and pragmatic understanding and practices of media use in education, including a return to the book.

What is certain is that in the next few years Brazilian academia will continue to face enormous challenges, ranging from the political arena, particularly from the far right, the economic realm, given the complete dependency of public universities on state funds, and the social front, with increasing demands for social inclusion. To those challenges one should add the new expectations arising from academia’s success during the pandemic in delivering fresh and useful science to the community. This research showed that bringing the academic community together, a must in contemporary Brazil, demands skillful listening to understand what the obstacles are for action, meaningful language that can address current issues rooted in common values, and pragmatic action that can address the interests of all stakeholders. pacman

About the author

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