

## The image of distance learning among students

Khelifa Mohamed Lamine<sup>1</sup>, Gaci Nadia<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University Center of Tipaza Morsli Abdallah, Laboratory of Studies in culture, Personality, and Development (Algeria).

<sup>2</sup>University 20 august 1955-skikda (Algeria).

The Author's E-mail: [Khelifa.lamine@cu-tipaza.dz](mailto:Khelifa.lamine@cu-tipaza.dz)<sup>1</sup>, [n.gaci@univ-skikda.dz](mailto:n.gaci@univ-skikda.dz)<sup>2</sup>

Received: 11/09/2024

Published: 05/04/2025

---

### Abstract:

This study explores in depth the experiences of Algerian students in the face of the rise of distance learning. In a rapidly changing global educational context, we sought to understand how students perceive this learning modality and whether it effectively meets their needs. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 students, we were able to identify the main challenges they face, notably technical problems and inequalities in access to resources. While the flexibility and autonomy offered by distance learning are appreciated, the need for direct human interactions remains significant. Our results highlight the importance of a hybrid pedagogical approach, combining the advantages of in-person and remote learning, to ensure quality and equitable education.

**Keywords:** Distance Learning, E-Learning, Social Representation, Online Courses.

---

### INTRODUCTION

Distance learning has gained increasing importance in the global educational landscape, and Algeria is no exception to this evolution. Technological advances in information and communication have contributed to the popularity of this method, particularly in higher education. However, opinions on distance learning vary widely among students, teachers, and higher education institutions.

In Algeria, these perceptions are shaped by cultural, economic, and technological factors, as well as by the recent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of this model. While some see it as an opportunity to access higher education, others question the quality and effectiveness of this approach. This situation raises crucial questions regarding equal access, pedagogical support, and the acceptance of new learning methods.

In this context, it is essential to study how these social perceptions influence not only students' experiences but also the evolution of educational practices in Algerian

universities. Such a study could provide valuable insights for adapting and optimizing distance learning according to the specific needs of the academic community in Algeria.

### **The objective of the study**

- Analyze students' perceptions: Study how students perceive distance learning.
- Evaluate pedagogical effectiveness: Measure the effectiveness of distance learning compared to traditional methods, based on students' perceptions and satisfaction.
- Propose improvements: Formulate recommendations to enhance distance learning practices, taking into account the needs and feedback of students and teachers.

### **1. Definition of Key Terms**

To maximize the benefits of distance learning, which is the core of our study, it is essential to clarify this concept as well as the related terms. Several expressions have emerged, such as distance education, e-learning, open and distance learning, and online courses. While these terms share similarities, they generally refer to an innovative learning process that differs from the traditional interaction between teacher and learner. This model emphasizes autonomy in managing learning activities, moving away from the conventional transmission of knowledge.

#### **1.1. Distance Learning**

The origin of distance learning dates back to 1840, thanks to Isaac Pittman, a teacher who enabled disadvantaged university students to access education through correspondence courses. His goal was to maintain a connection between students and their teachers through written exchanges. While these communication methods may seem outdated today, they paved the way for new modern teaching approaches, such as computer-assisted learning and the integration of new information and communication technologies.

Currently, this approach, often abbreviated as FAD (Formation à Distance), has experienced significant expansion. It is defined as a teaching and learning model focused on self-directed learning, emphasizing tasks carried out remotely.

According to Glickman, distance learning is "any type of organized training, regardless of its purpose, where most of the knowledge transmission or learning activities take place outside a direct, face-to-face relationship between teacher and learner." (Abric, 1995).

Similarly, the Inter-Order Liaison Committee on Distance Education offers a complementary definition: "Distance learning is a structured educational system designed to achieve the objectives of a course or program, allowing an individual to

learn relatively autonomously, with minimal constraints in terms of schedules and travel, while benefiting from remote support from resource persons." (Abric J. , 2003).

Several specific features of distance learning can be identified:

- Absence of direct contact between the teacher and the learner.
- Mediatized content in various formats: printed, digital, online, etc.
- Bidirectional interaction between the system and the learner.
- Individualized and collaborative activities, without direct connection between the group and the learner.
- Virtual pedagogical support provided through remote tutoring.

It follows that distance learning is perceived as an intermediate stage linking the teacher and the learner through various didactic tools that supplement the teacher's role.

Moreover, paraverbal cues in face-to-face communication, such as gestures and eye contact, which enrich mutual understanding, fade behind a screen. As a result, the regulation of interactions in virtual classes often suffers.

Furthermore, the transition from exclusively synchronous teaching (in-person) to a predominantly asynchronous learning process (remote) has reshaped the teacher's role, making them more proactive in supporting learning. Finally, learners' cognitive strategies are put to the test in an asynchronous learning context, where they must adapt their prior knowledge to analyze, question, solve problems, and formulate hypotheses without direct teacher guidance or interaction with peers.

## 1.2. E-Learning

In Anglo-Saxon countries, the term E-Learning has gained significant prominence in recent years. It refers to "electronic learning" and has been translated into French as E-Formation or E-Éducation. These terms encompass all online learning that relies on the use of the internet and multimedia resources as a channel.

The glossary of the French Ministry of Higher Education (2017) defines E-Learning as:  
"Any training system that uses a local network, a wide area network, or the Internet to distribute content, interact, or communicate. This includes distance learning in a distributed environment, as well as access to resources via download or online consultation."

Another definition states that E-Learning is: "Any form of learning using information technologies, with or without an instructor." According to Lebrun, E-Learning is: "A tool, or rather a method driven by electronics, used to facilitate or extend teaching and learning." (Abric J.-C. , 1994).

### 1.3. Online Courses

Self-directed learning material is entirely designed using technology to facilitate distance learning. It is evident, in light of these definitions, that delineating the boundaries of these concepts is a delicate task, as they reflect the evolution of distance education in response to technological advancements.

In this context, Viviane Glickman highlights this terminological ambiguity and seeks to clarify the issue: "It is difficult to introduce a certain rigor into these terms, which all serve to describe and promote highly diverse training systems. Their only common characteristic lies in the fact that they do not prioritize the near-permanent co-presence of teachers and learners, instead relying on mediatized educational supports." (Bertrand, 1990).

Thus, we can conclude that distance learning is a broad concept, encompassing various interpretations depending on the researchers. However, all agree on the autonomous nature of learning, where the relationship between teacher and learner is replaced by a purely mediatized interaction.

### 1.4. Social Representation

First, we will examine the process of social imagery and its varied meanings.

Almost a century ago, Durkheim (1898) introduced the concept of collective representations, distinguishing them from individual representations. According to him, these "collective" or "social" representations emerge from the interaction between "elementary consciousnesses" within society. They thus form a whole that goes beyond the sum of individual representations. These collective representations can manifest in "public opinion", thereby influencing actions in social life (Bonardi, 1999).

At the time, Durkheim's idea had little impact. It was not until sixty years later that Moscovici (1961) significantly expanded on this concept, establishing himself as the true founder of social representation theory. He defines social representations as follows: "A system of values, notions, and practices with a dual purpose. First, to establish an order that allows individuals to orient themselves within their social and material environment and to dominate it. Second, to ensure communication among members of a community by providing them with a code for their exchanges and a framework to name and classify the various parts of their world, as well as their individual or collective history." (Dumazedier, 2000). "A psychological organization, a particular mode of knowledge, a mediation process between concept and perception." (Durkheim, 1898) With this definition, Moscovici emphasizes the need to abandon the traditional distinction between subject and object. Unlike behaviorist models, he presents representation as a fusion of both. As he states: "There is no division between the external universe and the internal universe of the individual or the group. The subject

and the object are not fundamentally distinct." He also underscores the importance of studying "naïve thinking" and "common sense," which reveal social representations.

Furthermore, the way in which an individual constructs their reality highlights the influence of their personal history, as well as their social and ideological contexts. As Moscovici points out: "The link between the subject and the object is an integral part of the social bond and must be interpreted within this framework." Building on this, Abric (1994) concludes that: "A representation is always a social representation," defining it as: "A form of knowledge, socially constructed and shared, with a practical purpose, contributing to the construction of a common reality within a social group." (Gilland, 1987).

In his book *Cooperation, Competition, and Social Representation*, Abric also emphasizes in *Social Practices and Representations* that "the object does not exist in itself" and that representation is not merely a reflection of reality but rather a manifestation of the relationship between the subject and the object. This dynamic reshapes the subject: "Representation is both the product and the process of a mental activity through which an individual or a group reconstructs the reality they face and assigns it a specific meaning." Thus, it is a subjective phenomenon that depends on the object, the subject, and their position in society. In 1994, Abric referred to contingent factors (such as the nature of the situation and the immediate context) as well as general factors (such as the social and ideological context).

Abric's theory helps us better understand certain apparent contradictions in the representations studied. The analysis of the core and peripheral elements highlights both the rigidity and flexibility of a social representation, revealing its stable yet evolving nature. Thus, we understand that: "The identity of regulatory principles does not prevent the diversity of positions, which manifests through attitudes and opinions." An apparent multiplicity of positions can indeed emerge from common organizing principles.

## **2. The Organization of Social Representations: Content and Process**

Scholars generally agree that the content of a Social Representation consists of three dimensions: attitude, information, and field. In 1994, Jodelet grouped these dimensions under the term "*content of representations*", to which she added two processes of constructing Social Representations: objectification and anchoring.

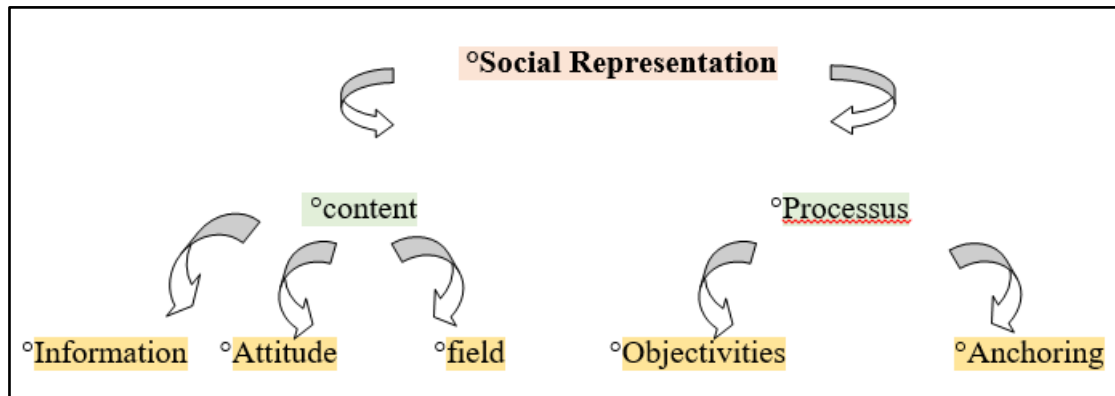


Figure 1 Structure and Components of Social Representation

### 3. The Content of a Social Representation

Information refers to the set of knowledge that an individual holds about an object (Moscovici, 1961). According to Jodelet (1994), this knowledge serves a practical purpose: it influences an individual's behavior towards a phenomenon or event, as well as the image they form of it. For example, professionals in child protection services typically have a better understanding of child development compared to parents receiving these services—who may have experienced a difficult childhood. This disparity in knowledge shapes their behaviors. Attitude represents the positive or negative orientation of an individual towards an object, whether it be a person or an element (Mayer & Ouellet, 1991; Moscovici, 1972). This orientation is crucial in selecting and prioritizing information within the representational field (Glikman, 2001). According to Gilly (1980), attitude is the most resistant aspect of social representations—it is not a fleeting opinion, but a deeply rooted cognitive stance. Within a Social Representation, attitude is closely linked to behavior and action, guiding individuals in regulating their conduct, shaping responses, and driving actions. Thus, Social Representations depend on attitudes, as people tend to inform themselves and construct representations only after taking a stance on an issue.

### 4. The Process of Constructing a Social Representation

The construction of a social representation relies on two key mechanisms: objectivation and anchoring (Bulletin officiel, n.d.). One convert abstract and theoretical elements into concrete images, while the other integrates the represented object into a pre-existing system of thought. These two processes demonstrate how society transforms an object, information, or event into a representation, and, in turn, how this representation shapes society.

#### 4.1. Objectivation

Objectivation is the process through which a group defines the object of representation, filtering scientific and technical information through their beliefs and values. It unfolds in three stages:

- Selection and Conceptualization – Information is filtered based on cultural criteria and existing representations.
- Formation of a Figurative Schema – Elements are organized into a structured image, omitting details that do not align with the perceived idea of the object.
- Naturalization – The figurative core becomes self-evident and is perceived as reality by the group.

At this stage, the figurative core serves as the foundation for all social representations surrounding the object. According to Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi (1996), objectivation leads to a shared form of thinking, which is the final product of this transformation.

#### **4.2. Anchoring**

Anchoring assigns a functionality to the representation (Herzlich, 1972). Its primary function is to make objective elements usable in everyday life by embedding them within a social framework that gives them a specific meaning (Jodelet, 1992).

Through anchoring, representations are incorporated into existing thought systems, classifying and explaining new information in a familiar way. According to Jodelet, a system of representation provides the reference points that anchoring uses to categorize new information as familiar and explain it through pre-existing knowledge (Jodelet, 1984).

#### **5. The Theory of the Central Core**

We have chosen this theory because we thought it was more appropriate for the subject. This is what we will try to prove through a simple analysis of the data received in the next section.

According to the theory of the central core, a social representation constitutes "a particular socio-cognitive system composed of two interacting subsystems: a central system and a peripheral system." (Lebrun, 2005, p. 269).

These two components are both complementary and specific in the study of social representations.

The central core is the most stable element of the social representation; it is more resistant to change. It is determined by the nature of the represented object, the relationship between the subject and the object, as well as the systems of values and norms that constitute the ideological environment.

The central core is attributed two dimensions according to the nature of the object and the purpose of the situation: a functional dimension and a normative dimension (Maeroff, 2003).

The functional dimension is present in situations oriented towards the completion of a task; it is associated with the immediate context of the production of representations and social practices. The normative dimension is present in situations where socio-affective, social (Moscovici, 1969), and ideological components, such as a norm, a stereotype, or an attitude, directly intervene.

For example, it is recognized that a value is maintained more durably than an opinion, as the latter can easily be modified or transformed through communication and social interactions.

The central core fulfills generative and organizational functions by giving meaning to the peripheral elements and determining the nature of the connections between the elements of the representation. The peripheral system is, in fact, more directly influenced by individual characteristics and the context in which individuals evolve. It allows for adaptation, differentiation based on personal experience, and the integration of individual experiences.

However, identifying the central core presents a significant challenge: the identification of the silent zone of representations. Indeed, within the central core of a representation, there can be two types of dormant elements: “those that are inactive because they are not activated” and “those that are inactive because they are inexpressible” (Moscovici, *Social Psychology*, 1984).

To activate this silent zone, specific techniques must be implemented. If one seeks to know, understand, and act on a representation, it is therefore essential to identify its organization, meaning the hierarchy of the elements that constitute it and the relationships between these elements.

It is specified that a change in attitude only affects the peripheral system of the representation, whereas "the central core" remains independent of attitudes.

In other words, a favorable or unfavorable attitude should not produce a difference in the central core, but rather only affect variations in the content of the peripheral system.

## **6. General Research Methodology**

### **6.1. Presentation of the Corpus and the Conducted Survey**

Social representations, as we have seen, consist of a set of information, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs organized around a central core. This complex set requires a multi-methodological approach in order to be analyzed.

To study social representations, we will proceed in two stages: first, we will compile a collection of representations; then, we will analyze the data obtained.

#### **6.1.1. The Collection of Representations**

To establish the collection of representations of young people on aging, we used two techniques: Observation and Interview.

The interview is also a necessary technique for studying the social representations of a group. While quantitative data is collected through questionnaires, the in-depth and guided interview allows for the exploration of more qualitative aspects. However, when used unilaterally, the interview also has certain limitations. Indeed, it promotes the production of discourse, an inherently complex activity. This discourse involves rules of enunciation, rationalization, control, a certain obligation of coherence, and even psychological, cognitive, and social filtering, all of which may bias its content. Furthermore, the context of the interview itself can influence the individual's discourse.

Finally, the interview requires a method of content analysis, which is dependent on the interpretation and subjectivity of the analyst.

We attempted to interview 22 students. Among them, 2 refused to accept our request, stating that they did not have accounts on the E-learning platform and therefore did not know how to respond (despite my explanations on the subject). The remaining 20 students responded positively to our request.

In total, we conducted 20 interviews based on a semi-structured interview guide, which focused on the following questions:

- Do you have online modules this year? (situation)
- How do you view these types of courses? (image)
- How do you perceive online courses? (attitude)
- What do you know about this type of training? (information)
- Do you consider it positive or negative? Why? (interaction)

After grouping identical words, synonyms, as well as very similar and frequently repeated words from a semantic perspective (nouns and adjectives with the same root, positive or negative...), we proceeded with the analysis.

The term most frequently associated with online courses relates to technical problems, which constitute a major obstacle to the smooth progress of learning, especially in the context of remote work. The lack of adequate equipment and the use of an unreliable Internet connection are the most commonly mentioned difficulties by students, particularly those living in remote rural areas or from conservative families who do not allow the acquisition of smartphones, thus limiting access to social networks.

Some students highlight the challenges they face during their online courses. They report that courses are often inaccessible or easily interrupted due to poor connectivity. One student also mentioned the socio-economic constraints that prevent

some of her peers from fully engaging in their training due to a lack of sufficient technological resources. Many of them do not own a computer and must resort to working on their phones when possible.

The vast majority of expressions refer to technical obstacles related to equipment and lack of Internet access in the university environment. These problems are particularly mentioned by students, especially those living in remote rural areas.

The second major category includes mostly terms with a positive connotation. Indeed, this type of training is not limited to entertainment and access to social networks. Students state that they also use it for research, information gathering, and enhancing their learning skills. This approach promotes continuous contact with the teacher, unlike traditional education, even during vacations and outside working hours.

The third category groups terms related to emotions. A significant portion of respondents claim that online work fosters socialization and improves interactions. Thanks to the ability to blend into the crowd by writing pre-prepared comments, participants can interact anonymously within a large group. This new educational system allows learners to step out of their bubble, feel secure, and engage in autonomous and voluntary learning.

Other groups of students perceive these innovative learning strategies as a sign of success and a step toward modernity and scientific progress, similar to developed countries.

Some opinions highlight the importance of independence in education. Many students express the desire for all university programs to be online, as it allows them to work, live, and study without being required to be physically present on campus.

On the other hand, some groups prefer traditional education, where students interact directly with their teachers and peers, thus promoting discussions and the exchange of ideas.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the social image of online education among students reveals a diversity of opinions and experiences. For some, this learning modality symbolizes progress toward modernity, offering flexibility and accessibility while fostering autonomy. Students appreciate the ability to interact anonymously and integrate into a large group, allowing them to expand their network and share ideas. On the other hand, others prefer traditional education, valuing direct interactions with their teachers and peers, which are considered essential for in-depth learning.

This duality highlights the importance of adapting teaching methods to the different social perceptions students develop about learning. It is crucial to find a balance between the benefits of online education and those of traditional approaches to create a rich and inclusive learning environment. Thus, the future of education may lie in the harmonious integration of these two modalities, enabling each student to thrive according to their preferences and learning objectives.

## REFERENCE

- Abric, J. &. (1995). Nature and functioning of the central core of a social representation. *International Journal of Social Psychology*.
- Abric, J. (2003). *Methods for Studying Social Representations*. Ramonville, France: Eres.
- Abric, J.-C. (1994). *Social Practices and Representations*. Paris, France: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Bertrand, Y. (1990). Contemporary Theories of Education. *French Journal of Pedagogy*.
- Bonardi, C. &. (1999). *Social Representations*. Paris: Dunod.
- Bulletin officiel*. (n.d.). (French Ministry of National Education) Retrieved from [https://www.education.gouv.fr/pid285/bulletin\\_officiel.html?pid\\_bo=40967](https://www.education.gouv.fr/pid285/bulletin_officiel.html?pid_bo=40967)
- Dumazedier, J. (2000). Open and Distance Learning: The Users' Perspective. (V. Glickman, Ed.) *French Journal of Pedagogy*, 131.
- Durkheim, É. (1898). Individual representations and collective representations. *Journal of Metaphysics and Ethics*, 6.
- Gilland, P. (1987). *Future Prospects of Various Social Security Systems in Light of the Evolution of Family Structures*. Council of Europe. Retrieved 10 10, 1987
- Glikman, V. (2001). Distance Learning. In *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Education and Training*. Paris: Nathan.
- Jodelet, D. (1984). Social Representations: Phenomena, Concept, and Theory. In S. Moscovici (Ed.), *Social Psychology*. Paris: University Press of France.
- Lebrun, M. (2005). *E-Learning for Teaching and Learning*. Academia.
- Maeroff, G. I. (2003). *A Classroom of One: How Online Learning Is Changing Our Schools and Colleges*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moscovici. (1969). Preface. In C. Herzlich, *Health and Illness: Analysis of a Social Representation*. Paris: Mouton.
- Moscovici. (1984). *Social Psychology*. Paris: French University Press.