

The pandemic and the reformulation of an extension project about oral health education: report of a year of experience with social media

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is report the one-year experience of the Sorriso Saudável Futuro Brilhante extension project, from the Department of Dentistry of the State University of Maringá, whose activities, previously purely face-to-face, as a result of the pandemic, were adapted to the remote form. In order to avoid the interruption of education and health promotion activities in the community and also to keep the participants motivated, electronic means were used. The team, composed of 16 academics coordinated by a professor, was divided into 4 groups (G1: production of informative digital material; G2: collection and transfer of donations for external actions; G3: social network management and dissemination of activities; G4: production of scientific content). Actions and content were posted on the Instagram page. Two events aimed at the dental community were also organized. Teacher/student communication became easier with the creation of the WhatsApp group, and the Instagram profile reached more than 900 followers in one year, breaking boundaries for the dissemination of content. The events were held free of charge, online, with national and international speakers and participants from several Brazilian states, with strong repercussions in the academic sphere. It is concluded that, although remote activities do not replace face-to-face activities, the new project format proved to be innovative, dynamic and beneficial for all involved, in addition to presenting low cost and great potential for coverage, being able to work independently or even add to face-to-face project activities, in future actions, when the pandemic comes to an end.

Descriptors: Oral Health Education. Health Sciences. Preventive Dentistry. COVID-19.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, the world received the news that a new coronavirus was circulating in Hubei, located in Wuhan, China¹. Its fast dissemination across all countries led to the imminent need of reinvention in the performance of various segments. As there was still no vaccine

and no effective forms of treatment, social distancing was necessary to contain the viral spread. Schools were closed and the implementation of remote work enabled the continuity of educational processes, including in the university environment.

Oral health care impacts on the quality of

systemic health, however, not all social strata have access to dental care and the information necessary to achieve autonomy in care, hence the importance of extension projects aimed at oral health education. They seek to disseminate academic knowledge in communities that need it most. It was with this objective in mind that the Sorriso Saudável Futuro Brilhante extension project began in 2010 at the Department of Dentistry of the State University of Maringá (UEM). Its activities were aimed at child and adult patients seen weekly at the UEM dental clinic, who belong to local/regional communities. Before each appointment and/or during the waiting period between appointments, at the reception and/or in the toothbrush room, patients attended lectures, received hygiene guidance and also received informative material and oral hygiene products, coming from donations.

Extension projects have always been important for a complete university education. Academics have the opportunity to reverse the acquired knowledge, for the benefit of society, while it has access to a quality service, based on scientific evidence. In addition, the link between university and community is strengthened ².

Paulo Freire (1980) ³, in his essay on extension or communication, explains how human relationships are purely dependent on communication: *“There is no really isolated thought, insofar as there is no isolated man. Every act of thinking requires a thinking subject, a thought object, which mediates the first subject with the second, and the communication between both, which takes place through linguistic signs. The human world is, in this way, a world of communication.”*

Likewise, the oral health education activities carried out in the extension projects are worked through communication and dialogue, not only being one-way activities, in which the

community only manifests itself as a listener and, the professional or student, as a dictator of what is true. The professional/population relationship should not result in a mandatory change of viewpoint, acting unilaterally, where only one part has the opportunity to express, and should not be, therefore, a conception of superiority of scientific knowledge towards the community, since this could lead to misinterpretations or even cultural invasion. Dialogue between university and the community is always possible and desirable, in which the latter is active and not just a listener. This is how an extension project should work, with professionals and the population reaching a consensus and a profitable exchange, based on communication tools.

The pandemic situation, however, imposed the need to practice social isolation and interrupt in-person academic activities. Projeto Sorriso, which has always aimed to take care of the oral health of the population, was faced with the urgent and challenging need to reinvent itself. How would it be possible, in this context, to continue a work of a purely face-to-face nature, where contact was so close between professors, academics and the community?

The internet is an environment with an important role in building bonds, as well as bringing people together, and disseminating knowledge, especially for the lay population. When used correctly, it becomes a favorable setting for educational and cultural activities, due to the ease of access and sharing of information, which also allows a large portion of the population to be reached, without the need to travel to a specific location to obtain access ⁴⁻⁶. It was under the light of this thought that Projeto Sorriso began its reformulation. In the virtual environment, a scenario was sought to achieve the purpose of university extension, making public safe and important information about oral and general health care ⁷.

The objective of this work is to report the experience of a year of reformulation of the “Sorriso Saudável Futuro Brilhante”, whose face-to-face activities were converted into virtual actions.

2 EXPERIENCE REPORT

The report presented encompasses the activities carried out by Projeto Sorriso since April 2020, when the need for social distancing arose and face-to-face activities were canceled^{8,9}, until April 2021.

The project, previously purely in person, has always worked to bring oral health education to the local community, represented by patients treated at the Dental Clinic of the State University of Maringá, as well as extramural actions, covering the municipality and the region. The students gave lectures at schools, institutions and events, welcomed, provided hygiene guidance and distributed informative material and kits with oral hygiene products.

The reformulation of the project began when, under the guidance of a professor, 16 undergraduate students of the second year of the undergraduate course in Dentistry at the State University of Maringá (UEM) were selected to compose the team destined to remodel the original format of Projeto Sorriso. At first, a group was created on the WhatsApp messaging application to facilitate communication between the professor and the academic team. Then, the page @projetosorrisoodontouem was created on the social network Instagram, to allow the offer of materials prepared by the project to the lay population and also to the academic community. Participants were divided into four groups, with 4 members each. They worked on different work fronts, with different goals, described below.

Group 1 - Production of digital information material aimed at the lay public. At first, the focus was on guidelines, through photos, texts

and videos, regarding materials for making, correct use, and also adequate hygiene of homemade masks, since these were being strongly recommended to the general public as a way to prevent contagion. Subsequently, other important topics were elaborated and published, such as hygiene instructions, more frequent injuries and oral manifestations of systemic diseases.

Group 2 - Collection and transfer of donations to people and/or institutions, as well as support for external social actions. Some activities of this group included obtaining, from manufacturing companies, personal protective equipment (PPE) for donation to the Regional University Hospital of Maringá (HUM), specifically to professionals working on the front line in the fight against coronavirus. The group also supported the social action Solidary Clothesline, carried out in the municipalities of Marialva and Paranavaí, where masks were collected and distributed to the population.

Group 3 - Creation, maintenance and digital support of the page @projetosorrisoodontouem, on the Instagram application, with a view to disseminating the digital information material produced, as well as the activities carried out, in addition to participating in the process of creating the informative content published on the network.

Group 4 - Selection, translation, summary and creation of weekly posts based on scientific articles on COVID-19 and other topics relevant to dentistry, aimed to students and professionals, for publication on the project's Instagram page. As a result, people who did not speak English had access to good quality scientific articles.

The project page started with the creation of a logo (figure 1a) which, later, when the participants started to have more mastery of the design tools, was updated (figure 1b). With the objective of creating a visual identity, a

publication model was adopted to be followed, with standardization of templates and color

palette (figure 1c), all available in the Canva application, with features of the free version.



Figure 1. Initial logo (a), updated version (b) and standardized template (c)

Each group chose themes and actions related to their respective roles in the project and followed a monthly schedule for implementation. The potential of each participant was explored, such as spelling correction, translation and the use of computer graphics. The minimum frequency of publications on the page was twice a week. The themes were freely selected, but they were approved by the entire work team and had to follow a publication schedule with alternation of themes.

Participants formed a group on the WhatsApp application where they could give their opinion, expose ideas, criticisms, praise and suggestions. This space was an important form of continuous evaluation of the activities carried out. From there, it was possible to make corrections, adaptations and also define the next steps. The Google Meet platform also helped in this regard. Through it, administrative meetings were held. The feedback from the community (lay and professional) was observed through the high rate of adhesion to the events, the number of followers and, mainly, through the engagement with the created profile, represented by the likes, reactions and the content of the comments after each post on social network.

Before, the target audience was patients from

the UEM dental clinic, representing the local community and the community of the municipality and region, assisted in extramural activities. With the adaptation to the virtual scenario, other groups were naturally reached. When working with social media, it is not possible to select specific communities and age groups. With that in mind, the intention was to develop general content to meet the needs and arouse the interest of people of different ages, regions, cultures and social classes, considering, in particular, the context of the pandemic.

At the time of the need to change the project, no investigation was carried out with the public, which was previously assisted with regard to virtual accessibility, since the means of communication with this public was exclusively face-to-face. Thus, it was not possible to reach children and the elderly in the same proportion as previously. These age groups have less access to social networks and, in general, demand mediation; the former because they still don't have the proper discernment, and the latter because of their lack of familiarity with technological resources. Even so, content and activities were developed for these population segments (figure 2).

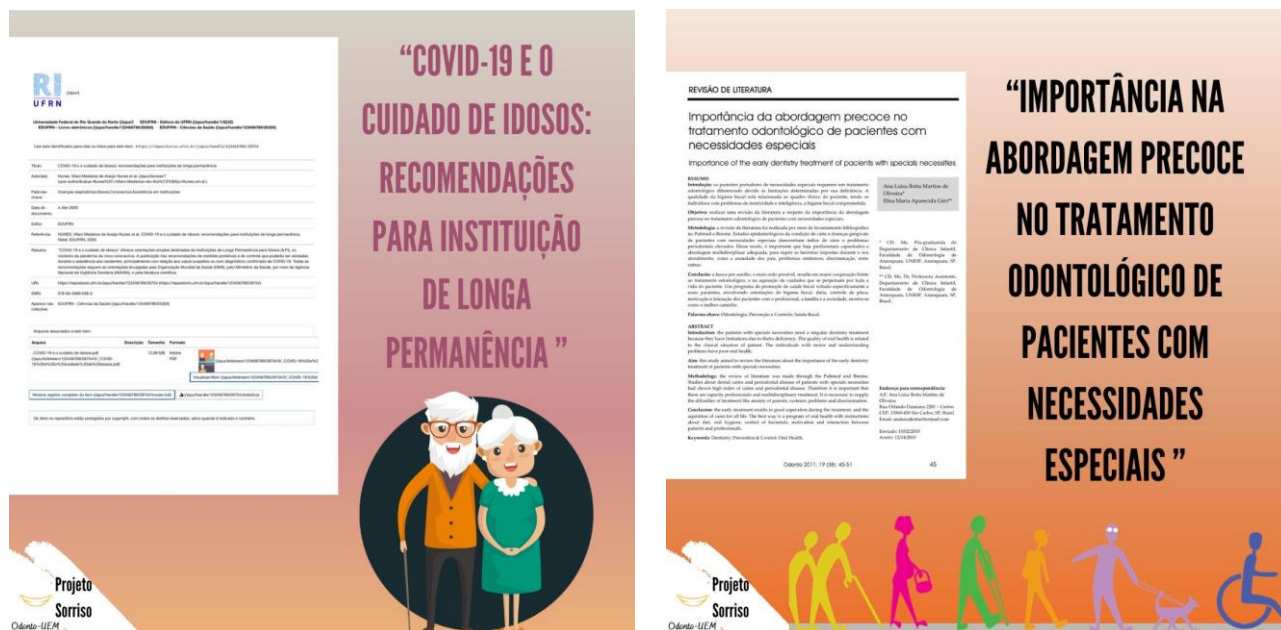


Figure 2. Instagram page posts about Covid-19, recommendations for the elderly and dental care for patients with special needs

When comparing face-to-face and virtual modes, we can say that, in the virtual environment, the workload is greater, since it is necessary to produce content more frequently and for a more heterogeneous audience. In face-to-face activities, the activities were compatible with the number and characteristics already known of patients at each clinic, the extramural actions were punctual, and the time interval between them was variable and longer. Each scenario, however, has its peculiarities. It is virtually impossible to carry out some oral health education actions, such as bacterial plaque disclosure and application of indices to measure the results of the project's actions, as it was done with the assisted children. On the other hand, in the face-to-face mode, it was not possible to reach dental students and professionals, as in the remote format, being restricted only to participating academics and professors.

With the intention of increasing the project's visibility in the virtual environment and disseminating scientific knowledge among the

academic community, two extension events were organized, one in each semester.

The first extension event, called “First Lectures Journey of Projeto Sorriso”, was offered free of charge and completely online. Ten lectures were held, live, with professors from different educational institutions in the country, four of them were State University of Maringá professors, and an international speaker was affiliated with the University of Michigan (USA). Topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic and also dental topics were addressed, such as Health Unic System management in Oral Health, mouth cancer, emergency in pediatric dentistry, orofacial harmonization and treatment plan in Integrated Clinic. More than 200 vacancies were opened to the participation of dentists, professors, postgraduate students, and undergraduate students from all over the country. Places were sold out in just two hours, after the registration forms for the event were made available, with participants from 13 Brazilian states.

It should be noted that, in 10 years of the

project, this was the first extension event held, and it was only possible because the remote format was adopted. Several expenses, such as the hiring of speakers (travel, accommodation, meals), as well as the leasing of a specific space, would probably have made an event of this magnitude unfeasible in the face-to-face modality. Furthermore, for the same reasons, many registrants would certainly not have the opportunity to participate.

Soon after the project page was created, the number of followers was small. Even so, assiduity

in publications was maintained. The first lecture journey was a game-changer in expanding its reach. On August 3, 2020, when the registration period for the event began, there was a considerable increase, with 224 new profile followers. In figure 3, it is possible to observe, from graphs based on the Instagram application, the comparison of the growth in the number of followers on a normal day, in relation to the increase on the opening day of registration for the event ^{10,11}.

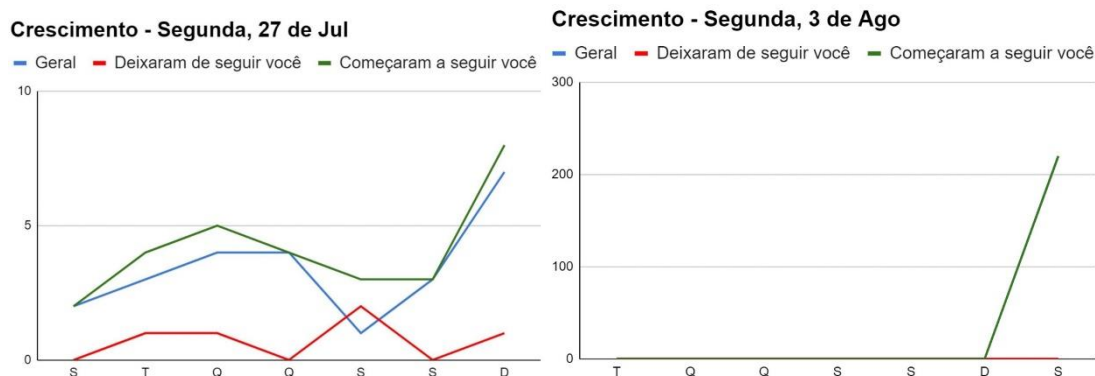


Figure 3. Growth of followers on Instagram on 7/27/2020 and on 8/3/2020

The second extension event, called "Ex-student, tell me your story?", also completely online and free of charge, however, had a different approach from the previous one. Six lecturers from the UEM Dentistry course were selected, including a quota system student, whose professional and personal histories had taken different directions. They were invited to speak, not only about the decisions that marked their professional performance, but also about their personal life story. The target audience was the students of the UEM Dentistry course, although the event also had the presence of undergraduates from other local faculties. The objective was to bring inspiring stories that could serve as a source of stimulation and motivation for the academic community,

especially at a time of so many uncertainties and emotional and financial disorders, in addition to inspiring and encouraging students to face the difficulties of the course in search of professional achievement.

On the Instagram profile of the Project, on March 18, 2021, visits to the page grew again. That same day, with the disclosure of the second event, 611 accounts were reached in the application, with 14% of non-followers of the profile and, on the following day (03/19), with the second publication, containing the list of guests, the reach was 704 accounts, with 15% of non-followers of the project, until then. At the opening of registrations, on March 22, 2021, 785 accounts were reached, being the second publication with the greatest coverage in the year

2021, as described in Figure 4, which depicts a graph constructed with data from the application itself, which demonstrates the interaction rates on March 18, 19 and 22, respectively.

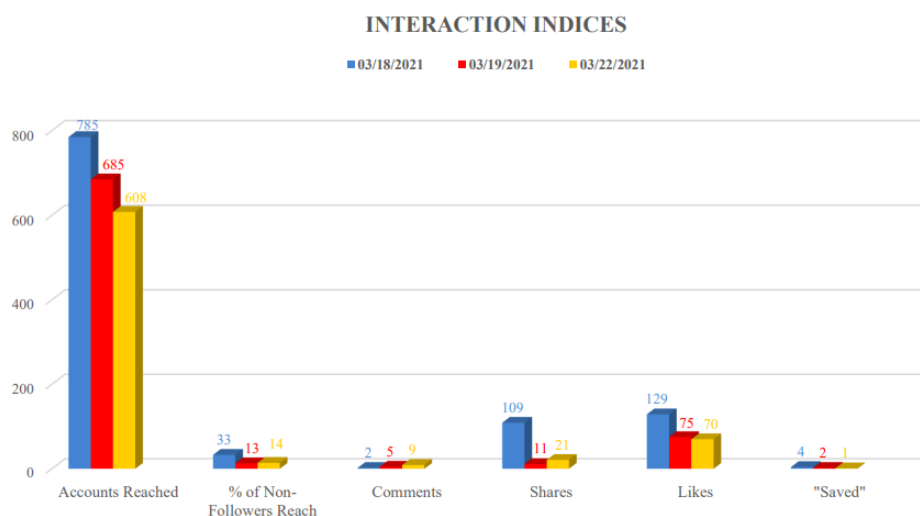


Figure 4. Reach of posts on Instagram on March 18, 19 and 22, 2021

Some other actions also stood out during the period, such as obtaining, from private companies, various gifts to be raffled off among the participants of both online extension events (First Lectures Journey of Projeto Sorriso and Ex-student, tell me your story?), in exchange for visibility for these brands in the project profile and during events. The page also helped to publicize important social and solidarity actions carried out in the city and region.

Although this was not the central objective of this new approach, the participating academics also benefited from the opportunity, in a time of social isolation and suspension of teaching activities, to enjoy a

new way of building their own knowledge and continuing the so important extension activities that, together with teaching and research, make up the university triad¹².

At the same time, the moment of a pandemic could not be more opportune for the dissemination of university scientific knowledge through social networks, since many people were working from home and generating demand for reliable information in the health area¹³. In view of the interaction and feedback from the public in the profile (chart 1), it was observed that this reformulation was the opportunity for a new, efficient, scientific and informative work, of important academic and social scope.

Chart 1. Comments from followers on different posts, exemplifying audience engagement

Follower	comment on post
1	<i>“Much love for this project”</i>
2	<i>“An honor to work with efficient people”</i>
3	<i>“We are happy to support such an important and innovative event, carried out with efficiency and affection by the team...”</i>
4	<i>“It was wonderful to have the opportunity to share my story with you! Congratulations to the project and the way in which you are continuing it”</i>
5	<i>“Very important post!!”</i>

Furthermore, the impact of changes in the teacher-student relationship must be highlighted. If, on the one hand, the suspension of face-to-face activities prevented periodic meetings during working hours, on the other hand, it allowed contact to intensify via WhatsApp. It wasn't necessary for everyone to be available synchronously, but there was always someone ready to interact if needed. Clearly, everyone became closer and more involved with the group work, even if physically distant.

From this experience, it was observed that the activities had their reach expanded, compared to what was achieved when the project was developed in a conventional way. In addition, the more you use digital resources, the more you learn to make the most of them. So, the efficiency and scope of information propagation tend to increase. These changes, because of its advantage in several aspects, can even become perennial. Therefore, virtual environments can and should be further explored in the search for scenarios for extension activities, including health promotion. In this way, important projects for the academic community and the population do not need to be interrupted, but only reformulated, in times of social distance.

Over time, there was a growth in the number of followers, which demonstrates acceptance and good scope of the project. This is gratifying and

encourages the team to remain engaged and constantly producing, however, it cannot be understood as a goal, but as a thermometer, a consequence of expanding the reach. The biggest commitment is to create reliable content based on scientific evidence, both for the lay public and for the dental community, thus keeping the project active. The interaction that the profile promotes (through the comments) shows that it also provides opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and experiences between members and the audiences. All relationships are important and need to be nurtured with commitment: teacher-student, student-student, student-lay community, student-dental community. In this sense, it is extremely valid to maintain the periodicity of activities and the motivation of the parties involved in the process.

In the future, other evaluative instruments about the satisfaction of the different actors involved with the remote format can also be incorporated and even used in qualitative research provided by the project.

The future directions of the project will depend on the evolution of the pandemic scenario. When there is a full return to face-to-face activities, it is intended to resume the work previously carried out, as its importance is undeniable and some actions will always require the face-to-face format.

However, everything that was built in this year of remote experience cannot be abandoned. It is expected that both formats can walk in parallel, complementing and strengthening each other.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From this innovative and dynamic experience, it can be concluded that the new project format was successful. It was beneficial for everyone involved and also served as an example for other projects of the institution. It was possible to continue with many actions and even expand the scope, precisely at a time when restrictions were imposed and it was imagined that it would not be possible to practice activities related to university extension. Despite the need for adaptation and the inherent difficulties, online communication tools can allow the reformulation and continuity of project actions and extension events, with some losses, but with several advantages, such as cost and reach. Still, it seems interesting that even with the resumption of face-to-face activities, online actions could be maintained in parallel.

RESUMO

A pandemia e a reformulação de um projeto de extensão sobre educação em saúde bucal: relato de um ano de experiência com mídias sociais

O objetivo deste artigo é relatar a experiência de um ano, do projeto de extensão Sorriso Saudável Futuro Brilhante, do Departamento de Odontologia da Universidade Estadual de Maringá, cujas atividades, antes puramente presenciais, em decorrência da pandemia, foram adaptadas à forma remota. Para evitar a interrupção das atividades de educação e promoção de saúde junto à comunidade e também manter os participantes motivados, foram utilizados os meios eletrônicos. A equipe, composta por 16 acadêmicos coordenados por um docente, dividiu-se em 4 grupos (G1: produção de material digital informativo; G2:

arrecadação e repasse de doações para ações externas; G3: gerenciamento da rede social e divulgação das atividades; G4: produção de conteúdo científico). As ações e o conteúdo eram publicados na página do Instagram. Também foram organizados dois eventos dirigidos à comunidade odontológica. A comunicação professor/aluno ficou mais fácil com a criação do grupo de WhatsApp, e o perfil no Instagram alcançou mais de 900 seguidores em um ano, rompendo fronteiras para a divulgação dos conteúdos. Os eventos foram realizados de forma gratuita, online, com palestrantes nacionais e internacionais e participantes de diversos estados brasileiros, obtendo forte repercussão no âmbito acadêmico. Conclui-se que, embora as atividades remotas não substituam as presenciais, o novo formato do projeto se mostrou inovador, dinâmico e proveitoso para todos os envolvidos, além de apresentar baixo custo e grande potencial de abrangência, podendo funcionar de forma independente ou ainda somar-se às atividades presenciais do projeto, em ações futuras, quando a pandemia chegar ao fim.

Descritores: Educação em Saúde Bucal. Ciências da Saúde. Odontologia Preventiva. COVID-19.

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