

# The Lowly Correspondence Courses for the Masses: Fraud or Redemption?

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*A study conducted during the late 70s suggests that correspondence courses have the potential of having a positive impact in modest clientele who seek to learn or sharpen their working skills. Despite the increasing use of modern learning tools such as the Internet and TV, it seems as though correspondence courses have preserved some niches. However, they remain as far away from the limelight as they were 25 years ago. Perhaps taking some time to review the advantages and strengths of these often overlooked courses could yield higher payoffs than expected.*

“My correspondence course was auto-mechanics, but I work repairing tractors. It is somewhat different but the course helped me a lot. I was a farm hand, now I am a tractor mechanic, employed by a repair shop where I remain until now. I got my driving license and have afterwards gone back to evening school. I hope one day to become a mechanical engineer.” (Response to a survey of correspondence school graduates)

In times of instruction via wide-band Internet, what are we to say of its poorest cousin, correspondence education? And what are we to say of its most plebeian version, the vocational trades taught by correspondence?

Comic books advertise courses on radio and TV repair, technical drafting, dressmaking, cake decoration, auto-mechanics, accounting and many other common trades. (In the United States, typically, these courses are advertised in matchboxes.) These courses, in most countries, are not regulated by law, are run by private enterprises, and cater to modest clientele.

Most academics and educators dismiss them as innocuous at best and outright fraud, at worst. Not only that, but they are accused of selling illusions to those who can least afford to pay for unfulfilled dreams.

But is that true? These programs are so lowly and forgotten that few serious researchers ever bothered to find out anything about them.

Several years ago, in Brazil, with a few graduate students, we decided to find out what was hidden behind those advertisements claiming that one could get jobs, and make money by taking one of those courses.<sup>1</sup> A previous survey had identified 31 correspondence schools in the country (1977), enrolling around 240,000 students (almost ten times more than the network of federal technical schools). Five schools were included in the sample, all the large ones being there. With the help of school administrators, a 25 percent random sample of students, graduates and dropouts was chosen to be interviewed by mail, using a detailed questionnaire. Being used to the mail for communication, the graduates replied in large numbers. We got a response rate of 55 percent, quite impressive for mail surveys. The survey yielded 3,704 usable questionnaires from students, 4,230 from graduates and 898 from dropouts.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucia Radler dos Guaranys and Claudio de Moura Castro, *Ensino por correspondência no Brasil* (Rio: IPEA, 1979).

## **Shattered Conventional Wisdom**

There is a widespread assumption that these courses could not work well, given the unreliability of the mail systems. In fact, the Brazilian mail system had a horrible reputation in the seventies. One of the first surprises was to find that only 2 percent of the respondents complained of lost shipments and only 11 percent reported delays. So much for untested prejudices. This survey just about shattered all conventional wisdom about such courses in three ways.

### *Relation of the Students to their Alma Mater*

Most of the respondents assumed that the survey was directly connected with the school and gave sequence to a strikingly personal dialogue with their former teachers. The questionnaires were scribbled all over with personal stories, with very intimate details of their lives. We were surprised to find that instead of a distant and lofty relationship with unknown people from the correspondence schools, the students were very emotional and candid about their past experiences. Somehow, they assumed there were real people behind the cold and impersonal envelopes coming from the mail.

### *The Social Stratification of the Student Body*

We looked at the distribution of working class, middle class and upper class students. We also examined the distribution of parent's education. As it turns out, the social composition of the clientele is equivalent to that of the first years of primary education. But as we know, the social stratification of the first grades of school is very similar to that of society as a whole, since the social class of children enrolled at primary is the same as that of society. In other words, correspondence schools cater to a representative sample of the Brazilian population. Since after a few years of primary schooling, dropouts increased dramatically (in the late seventies), all higher levels of education are more socially selective than correspondence schools. Hence, correspondence education is the only mode of education—other than the early years of primary—where the poor are not under-represented. Whatever benefit it might bring to students, it does with equity, since the chances of being enrolled are exactly the same for the poor and the rich. And since the poor are far more numerous in the population, correspondence education means education predominantly for the poor. No other government or private program achieves the same level of equity obtained by these modest for-profit operators.

### *Hobby vs. Vocation*

By looking at the choice of courses offered, we assumed some were hobbies, such as cake decoration, baking, sewing and embroidering. By contrast, radio and TV repair and auto-mechanics were thought to be true vocational offerings. Again, we were wrong. Typically, radio and TV were some of the few courses taken by middle class youth who wanted a hobby. By contrast, cake decoration and sewing were real vocational subjects to the very poor and undereducated students who are the predominant clientele. The questionnaire gives a clear picture on why students take courses: only 1 percent of the respondents indicated that this was a hobby.

By decreasing order of importance, the following courses were found in the sample: Radio and TV repair, Drafting, Sewing, Electricity, Secondary school equivalency type programs, Accounting, Mechanics, Health professions, Cattle and Farming.

These are down-to-earth programs. However, when the offerings of the entire set of schools was examined, thereby adding small and unknown institutions, the range of courses increases dramatically, reaching 126 different titles. Many of those do not seem particularly serious at all: Egyptology, occult sciences, hypnotism, how to conquer girls, and so forth. Overall, there is the suggestion of a market shared by serious and responsible operators as well as by fly-by-night, sometimes outright dishonest institutions. This, of course, is the price of the full deregulation prevailing in the sector. Whether this is better than the

heavy and clumsy hand of government bureaucrats remains one of the policy issues where the authors could never make up their minds.

## **Effectiveness**

But, of course, if the programs offer nothing tangible to the students, having a working class clientele means that the poor are being swindled, rather than the less poor—not a good deal for society. To find answers to these most critical questions several avenues were pursued. First, we looked at the quality of the teaching materials. Second, we asked about dropout rates. Third, we looked at evidence on the questionnaire indicating increases in personal earnings, resulting from the courses.

### *Quality of Teaching Materials*

We first had the teaching materials examined by experts in instructional technology. By and large, they concluded that they were professionally done and covered the subjects correctly (two thirds were rated as good). The students also had a positive opinion of the materials, 73 percent found them neither too easy nor too difficult and 89 percent considered the “hands-on” practices as very useful.

That was not a surprise to this author who had, as a youth, taken a radio repair course from one of the schools surveyed (Instituto Radio Técnico Monitor). The materials were indeed carefully designed, practical, hands on, adopting the advertised “learn-by-doing” approach, something that academic schools never truly adopted, even to this day. In fact, compared to schoolbooks dealing with equivalent subjects, they were far easier to understand and the practical experiments a far cry from the stale academic teaching prevailing then.

### *Dropout Rates*

Dropout rates are very variable but seem to range from 30 percent to 80 percent. This may seem high by usual standards but turns out to be the usual for distance education anywhere in the world. The discipline required to study alone is not to be found in too many students. Getting started and trying to proceed is the conventional screening mechanism to find out who has the profile to take correspondence courses. The economical losses of this “trial and error” method are minimal, since this dropout rate is already factored in the logic of the course. From the point of view of the students, they only pay for the materials received. From the point of view of the schools, they print materials proportionally to the predicted thinning out of the ranks.

What surprised us was to notice that economic factors played a major role in dropping out. Even though the entire program costs typically US\$50 to US\$100, since many of the students are very poor indeed, school operators noted that enrollment fluctuates with the business cycle, students dropping out when unemployment increases. Another source of dropping out is what we could call “self-graduation.” Students decide that they have got all they needed from the course. For instance, they learn radio repair and do not continue to take TV repair, which may not interest them.

### *Economic Returns*

When we started looking for tangible evidence of economic results from the course, we were first struck by the abundance of comments by the students concerning what the course had brought to them. Hence, instead of just looking at measurable increases in earnings, we were able to tabulate qualitative comments offered by students. The combination of the two sources of information makes the conclusions more robust, since neither of these sources is by itself entirely reliable.

Half of the graduates report that they derived economic benefits from the course. Of those, 32 percent reported that they could perform tasks easier, 6 percent were promoted in their jobs, and 8 percent had

salary increases. Even one fourth of the dropouts claimed that they were performing better in their jobs. Surprisingly, as much as 79 percent of the students report occupational benefits.

Responding on the reasons that salaries might have been increased in the past, 39 percent attribute this partly to the course and 21 percent entirely to the course. Also interesting to notice is that half of the graduates either found a job related to the course or were already working in such a job prior to taking the course.

The questionnaires were manually reviewed, in an attempt to sort out those who had documented the benefits. We found that in 29 percent of the cases the alleged benefits were backed up by concrete details of what happened to them. Another 12 percent claimed benefits but did not show numbers of other tangible evidence. Hence, we have close to one third of respondents with hard data on benefits and another 12 percent claiming to have had benefits. Considering that courses typically cost around one minimum wage and that modal students could have a salary equivalent to two minimum wages, increases of only 3 to 5 percent in earnings are sufficient to pay off the course in one year. This is not a bad result for an additional investment of two hours a day of studies, as reported in the questionnaires.

This is already a very impressive indication of effectiveness. But when we consider that 52 percent of the students did not take the course with an expectation of economic benefits, the proportion of those expecting benefits and getting them practically doubles. In addition, for those with less than 19 years of age, immediate economic benefits are less likely. The most predictable results go for those who were already in skilled manual occupations. Typically, men change jobs and women enter the labor market for the first time after the course.

Overall, the results of such a survey do not permit a rigorous estimate of rates of return on investment. However, piecing together the data and complementing them with qualitative data culled from the questionnaire, we can arrive at a suggestive picture. Once we exclude those who were not interested in economic benefits and those who due to young age or other reasons could not obtain them, we seem to be dealing with a population where substantially more than half derives economic benefits from correspondence schools. Since the costs of the programs are quite modest, typically much less than 10 percent of their monthly earnings, these seem to be quite impressive results.

Let us not forget: these are private outlays in education made by a group that has the same social stratification as that of the population of a poor country such as Brazil. No other form of education, other than the early levels of primary school, caters to such a modest clientele. Finding significant returns on those investments was a pleasant surprise.

Of course, these are results of the late seventies in Brazil, a country that has dramatically changed since. What has happened to these courses since?

Perhaps not surprisingly, these courses remain as removed from mainstream education as always. Serious educators still have not taken notice of them—sad for the authors, the book describing the results of this research does not seem to have changed the landscape. Therefore, there are still no reliable data at present.

To have an idea of what changed since the publication of the book, the author contacted an executive of Instituto Monitor, the oldest and main survivor in correspondence education.<sup>2</sup> Being in business for 61 years, the school has enrolled between five and six million students, out of which, 30 percent graduated. (How many schools have produced two million graduates?) Presently, the school enrolls 30,000 new students every year and graduates 50 percent of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Email from Roberto Palhares (June 2000).

Most private correspondence schools have closed down but a few semi-public institutions have been offering respectable quality programs. Monitor and Instituto Universal Brasileiro—always the largest two—and the smaller remaining schools probably enroll around one hundred thousand students.

It seems that the lower middle classes now predominate in the courses. Somehow, working class students are less frequent than before. Correspondence education will sooner or later suffer the competition of more modern means. This, however, has not happened yet. Internet and computers cater to higher social strata that need upgrading in their jobs. Television is massively used for education in Brazil, hundreds of thousands of students are going to classes where a TV is complemented by a teacher aid. But these programs replace academic schools, rather than offer trade training. Therefore, correspondence schools still have their niches. Regulation of correspondence education has been created. When discussing this issue in the original monograph, we feared that it could do more harm than good. Unfortunately, it seems that we were right. Regulation seems to be bureaucratic and be of little help.

To sum up, correspondence education remains a powerful means to reach modest clienteles with practical courses that have positive impact in their lives. Yet, it is as removed from the limelight now as it was a quarter of a century ago.