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Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to CoronaVirus pandemic

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Editorial

Introduction: Education crisis on global scale due to COVID19 pandemic

"Sometimes it takes a natural disaster to reveal a social disaster" Jim Wallis

At the end of the day, the lesson learnt was so simple... With online and offline connections, the world is a global village (McLuhan, 1962) and a butterfly flapping its wings in Asia can cause a hurricane all around the world (Lorenz, 1972). Currently, it seems that the global education system is in the middle of this hurricane. These times, where we are all witnessing developments warily, are certainly interesting and strange, but the hope is that lessons will have been learned once things hopefully return to normal. Though there were early warnings to be prepared (White, Ramirez, Smith, & Plonowski, 2010) and already ongoing interruptions to education (Briggs, 2018; GCPEA, 2018), this is the first crisis to occur on the global scale in the digital knowledge age, and there will be socio-cultural, economic, and political consequences in the wake of this crisis. In other words, the educational landscape will feel the rush of air from the butterfly's flapping wings to the full extent.

In a nutshell, following the CoronaVirus (COVID19) outbreak in December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID19 as a global pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). To slow down and prevent its spread, many countries followed strict protocols, such as complete lockdowns or regulations to facilitate social distancing, while a few countries preferred herd immunity. Efforts to stop the viral outbreak included working from homes, providing flexible working hours, or closing many institutions where people could infect one another with COVID19. Protocols to shut down buildings involved schools, universities and many other educational institutions. This situation forced all levels of educational institutions to operate remotely and to put emergency remote teaching into practice.

It is reported that more than 1.5 billion learners of all ages from around the globe are affected due to school and university closures owing to the COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020a; UNICEF, 2020). The affected number of students equals around 90% of the world's enrolled students (UNESCO, 2020a; 2020b), and the shutting down of schools have widened learning inequalities and have hurt vulnerable children and youth disproportionately (UNESCO, 2020a). Considering that education is a fundamental human right (UN, 1984), in adopting the motto #LearningNeverStops, different measures were taken and solutions produced immediately to sustain the education system (UNESCO, 2020a; 2020c; 2020d; 2020e); however, fueled by the digital divide (UNESCO, 2020f), this doesn't change the fact that there are already known and there will be unpredicted consequences beyond the interruption of education (UNESCO, 2020g).

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Another day in paradise: We are suddenly waking up to go online?

We have now seen that the education system, in general, is unprepared and vulnerable to external threats. As a response to the global educational crisis, online emergency remote teaching has been put into practice. However, we stumble into defining what we are desperately trying to accomplish. Online distance education involves more than simply uploading educational content, rather, it is a learning process that provides learners agency, responsibility, flexibility and choice. It is a complex process that requires careful planning, designing and determination of aims to create an effective learning ecology. In appearance, we are currently engaged in seems like online distance education, however, in essence, this is rather a temporary solution, one that would be more properly named *emergency remote teaching.* In other words, *online distance education* is one thing and *emergency remote teaching* is another thing. Such a distinction is important, because the degree to which educators believe in distance education these days will play a significant role in the prosperity of distance education in a post-COVID world.

In this regard, when we consider online distance education, we should go beyond sharing simple tools, tips and tricks and instead focus on the changing learners' needs, learning contexts, and the availability and accessibility of the tools. Another significant distinction we have to highlight is how learners are involved in the process. Apparently, while distance education has always been an alternative and flexible *option* for learners, emergency remote teaching is an *obligation*, which means that we have to use different strategies and approach the case with different priorities.

What do *remote* and *distance* represent in definitions?

What do we mean when we use the words *remote* and *distance* in an educational context? With some nuances of implementation in remote teaching (Turoff, & Hiltz, 1986), distance education slightly differs from emergency remote teaching. Distance education is an interdisciplinary field that has evolved over time and that has served well in responding to learning needs and in guiding open educational practices (Bozkurt, 2019a; 2019b; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). By definition, distance education is characterized by the distance in time and/or space between learners and learning resources. While remote education refers to spatial distance, distance education considers distance within the perspective of different angles and strives to explain it through transactional distance. Distance education further places emphasis on interactions between different parties and through different channels to let learners be more engaged in the learning process (Moore, 1989; Riggs, 2020). In this sense, online distance education and emergency remote teaching are not the same things. What is currently being done, emergency remote teaching, should be considered a temporary solution to an immediate problem (Chuck et al., 2020; Golden, 2020). In sum, it is true that many creative temporary solutions benefit from the experiences of online distance education, and they sound and look alike; however, it would be unfair to put online distance education and emergency remote teaching in the same equation. In this sense, using the right definitions is important because rushing into emergency remote teaching, calling it online distance education or online learning and assuming online tools to be a form of online distance education should be approached with caution. First, designing learning systems under the wrong assumptions and framing them around wrong definitions will make us more vulnerable to errors along the way. Second, when things are settled and go back to normal, what people will remember will be bad examples from a time of crisis, and the years of efforts it has taken to prove the effectiveness of distance education can vanish all of a sudden. It is, therefore, distance educators' responsibility to speak truthfully, to provide working solutions and to use terms carefully and intentionally. Last but not least, another flaw in current practices is the huge investments and high trust place in merely technology enhanced learning processes. To save the day, they can be effective, but for long-term planning, we should reconsider what we are doing.

In all, we have to approach with caution arguments made on purely technology-centric solutions. In the dystopian Brave New World (Huxley, 1932), we set our hopes on technology, hoping that it will save education and cure all the problems (Weller, 2020). Yet, it is a delusion to which we are recurrently lured and trapped (Sharma, Kawachi, & Bozkurt, 2019). We naively forget that technology is a tool, not an

end; and the right approach should not be learning from technology, but rather, learning with technology. If we do not learn from our mistakes during COVID19 times, reality eventually will take its revenge when things are over (Coeckelbergh, 2020).

Changing visions and narratives: What should we do and how can we keep learning in a safe learning ecology?
It is maybe time to leave behind our obsession with teaching, transmitting knowledge and giving lectures using cool, shiny EdTech tools. In a time of crisis, when people are under trauma, stress and psychological pressure, should we focus on teaching educational content or should we focus on teaching how to share, collaborate and support? We should remember, when things go back to normal, people will not remember the educational content delivered, but they will remember how they felt, how we cared for them, and how we supported them. We have to further remember that care is a basic characteristic of human life, and that all people want to be cared for (Noddings, 2002). Leaving the notion that what's happening is a great online learning experiment (Zimmerman, 2020) and an opportunity to test online pedagogy centric approaches, we should try to amplify emotional presence in order to create a climate of empathy and care, and following that we should focus on different types of presence, such as teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence.

While we rush to implement emergency remote teaching, are we focusing enough on learners and learning? Learners are simply being bombarded with lectures like a *locust wave* while sitting in front of a webcam. It seems that the hitherto focus on learner engagement is now but an afterthought. Based on the above arguments, it is more important to build support communities, and share the knowledge and experience we have to provide efficient and meaningful learning processes. These learning processes, of course, should not aim at purely learning, but rather, be directed towards therapy, empathy, and care. We should show our commitment to support our students, and to institute teaching and learning on the grounds of a pedagogy of care, not on purely didactic and insensitive grounds.

Unfortunately, there is no magic spell to make things right, and it is a well-known fact that the *one size fits all* understanding does not work anymore. Before putting approaches into practice, we have to think about many variables, including target group, age range, technological infrastructure, and social and economic context. It has been claimed that developed countries are at an advantage in initiating emergency remote teaching (Saavedra, 2020), but this is not valid for every country. For instance, it is argued that "it is only the privileged that will benefit from the #pivotonline" (Adam, 2020). Apparently, "the poorest and most vulnerable members of society are being hardest hit, both by the pandemic and the response" (Guterres, 2020). Sadly, for whatever reason, many countries have already been suffering from interruptions to education, and for many, this is not a new narrative. From a Darwinian point of view, survival of the fittest is not acceptable in this case. We teach and explain the ideals of universal values and advice to narrow the gaps, but as shameful as it is, we see that the digital divide is still a threat and many still suffer from unavailable educational opportunities.

This clearly implies that the widening of participation and the promotion of social justice and equity are other important issues that should still be on our agenda. The excuses can be accepted, and mistakes can be tolerated for the first wave of interruption to education, However, what about the second, third and more waves? As explained earlier, emergency remote teaching is not an option, but an obligation. If we persist in making excuses and mistakes now, what will we say to the next [lost] generations in the future? We, therefore, should be prepared in advance, learn from our mistakes, and not let history repeat itself… When the time comes, if we would like to say that we did the right things to the next generations, we should be better prepared and re-engineer distance education through online and offline modes to respond to any interruptions to education.

As a final remark and as a note for future discussions, we have proudly seen that open educational practices, open educational resources, open scholarship, open data and open science earned their

stripes during these rough times and have proven that they are mechanisms functioning for the greater good.

Conclusion

The world is changing, and the causes of interruptions to education are not limited to pandemics; wars, local conflicts, and other types of natural disasters are issues that should be kept on the future agenda as potential sources of interruption. Emergency remote teaching or re-engineered distance education should collaborate with different shareholders (e.g., psychologists, sociologists, therapists, etc.) to offer better and timely solutions. Producing solutions on broader grounds is vital, because during times of crises, delivering content is not the only issue of concern, caring and supporting learners at such times is also important. As a matter of fact, what we teach in these times can have secondary importance. We have to keep in mind that students will remember not the educational content delivered, but how they felt during these hard times. With an empathetic approach, the story will not center on how to successfully deliver educational content, but it will be on how learners narrate these times.

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