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Education in normal, new normal, and next normal: Observations from the past, insights from the present and projections for the future

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Editorial

Introduction: Normal is a Relative Term

“Normal is an illusion. What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly.” – C. Addams

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been more than a crisis; it has been a global wake-up call to change our paradigms and the way we perceive the world. Not surprisingly, the pandemic has altered the way we interpret the *normal* as well as the way we live. Normal, by its nature, is a relative term and, presently, we have different derivations of it: Normal, new normal, and next normal. Nevertheless, it is important to always remember that one's *new normal* can be someone else's *normal*, or one's *normal* could have hitherto been a *new normal* for someone else. Likewise, *normal* and *new normal* for some can be the *next normal* for others. These derivations of normal suggest that we are experiencing an unprecedented time, one marked by major shifts in the way we understand and interpret different areas of life, not least of all education, which has and will continue to undergo changes, particularly in the way we teach and learn. With the wide range of written and oral arguments already made on this subject, there is uncertainty surrounding what the future will bring to us, which means that now is the time to ask what is past, what is present, and what is next? Realizing that the world, and education in particular, as we know them will never be the same, it would be prudent to address some of the most critical issues on the educational landscape by turning our attention to what we have learned from the past and seen in the present and applying our interpretations of them to ensure a solid future.

The Great Reset and Consequences in a Post-COVID World

“All around us are the consequences of the most significant technological, and hence cultural, revolution in generations.” – L. Lessig

Today we are living in a strange new world, where to be social means to keep distance and, weirdly, to be labeled positive has negative connotations. These developments suggest that we are on the brink of a new future, where time would be understood in terms of BC and AC, to indicate before and after COVID, respectively. In fact, we are going through a global reset of many things including education. Sooner or later, we will have to face the consequences generated by the emergence of this new era and the bright and dark future paths they will alternately put us on. This editorial reimagines the future by considering potential scenarios and raises some critical questions, questions that are now only whispered and addressed in our minds and hearts, but whose responses will shape our futures and have consequences.



The great natural experiment and the great online: Emergency remote education

"No experiment is ever a complete failure. It can always be used as a bad example."- P. Dickson

With the closure of educational institutions at every level, nearly the whole world shifted to online emergency remote education (ERE) (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). This shift has been designated as the great online learning experiment (Zimmerman, 2020), through which we will be able to really understand what works and what does not. While ERE and distance education appear to be the same thing, they are actually distinct from one another (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). The primary difference between the two is that distance education is an optional, planned activity which is grounded in theoretical and practical knowledge, while ERE is a mandatory, survival mode of education implemented in times of crisis using all the resources available, including offline and/or online tools (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Moreover, the main purpose behind ERE is to minimize spatial distance to ensure continuity of education, whereas for distance education, it is to minimize transactional/psychological distance to facilitate the continuity of teaching and learning. In this context, as long as what we practice is an obligation rather than an option, we can think of it as a last measure and, therefore, define it as emergency remote education. During this pandemic, the nuances, which were misinterpreted or mistranslated, between these two terms have led to great confusion and in turn, have caused a number of educational missteps to be made.

Educational sin: CTRL+C / CTRL+V

"It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation." – H. Melville

To copy and paste in a computing environment, we are accustomed to using CTRL+C and CTRL+V combinations, respectively. Yet in pivoting to online ERE, the same simple mechanism of copying and pasting cannot be applied, as seen in the failure of copying traditional face-to-face education and pasting it to online education. Instead, we should have used CTRL+O to open a new chapter. Imitating a process meant for something else has resulted in unsuccessful and ineffective learning experiences, contributing to the bad reputation of distance education, the effects of which will be remembered in post-COVID times. To remedy this situation, the benefits and positive features of distance education need to be explained, advocated, and promoted. In short, distant learning's blind imitation of face-to-face instruction has been the chief educational error, metaphorically an educational sin during this pandemic, one which will have both short-term and long-term consequences in the post-COVID world.

Digital burnout and digital fatigue

"The digital burnout was coming. The pandemic is expediting it." M. A. Miller (2020).

In the post-COVID world, we can expect there to be negative consequences from the great online experiment, most prominently, digital fatigue, an issue that will certainly surface in the near and distant future. After the global pivot to online learning, there has been widespread reports of digital burnout and fatigue (Degges-White, 2020; Nadler, 2020; Sklar, 2020), a newly emerged complex and multidimensional problem (Lee, 2020). The symptoms associated with digital fatigue include "stress, fatigue, desensitization toward the environment, loss of interest, and physical and mental problems" (Erten & Özdemir, 2020, p. 68). Though fatigue is largely related to our physical or mental performance, more recently, it has been linked to the digital tools and/or spaces we use during online education. Teachers and learners alike can experience burnout as a result of multitasking, gazing constantly at the screen, hyper focusing, adapting to online timing, dissonance between the real world and virtual world, body-mind disconnection, lack of natural rhythm, feeling of being monitored, and the extensive efforts involved in interpreting online conversations without the aid of nonverbal or visual clues. However, the recipe to prevent digital burnout and fatigue is relatively simple: apply the best theories and practices of

online distance education and design actual learning processes rather than processes with techno-fetish designs.

Divide (digital or analog) is an inherent characteristic of humankind

“It is dangerously destabilizing to have half the world on the cutting edge of technology while the other half struggles on the bare edge of survival.” – W. J. Clinton

The digital divide, which refers to the gap between those who have and do not have access to computers and the internet (Van Dijk, 2006), is a term that has evolved over time and emerged in new forms (Ragnedda, 2017). While the idea of a human divide is not limited to the digital form (it never was), currently it is the digital divide that has been threatening the entire globe. And while we are already well aware of the cultural, religious, ethnic, and economic divides that separate humanity, from an educational perspective, we are now witnessing that the digital divide is far greater than we imagined, as it is responsible for grave inequalities, inequities and injustices. The question is, how do we respond as a global society? Should we continue to let the gap widen, or should we act now before the gap grows out of control?

The global online village

“We must create a kind of globalization that works for everyone... and not just for a few.” - N. Kirchner

In addition to the many and diverse problems around the world (Olivié & Gracia, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a great degree of uncertainty regarding the future of globalization (Ajami, 2020), especially as it relates to education (Wang, 2020). Deglobalization measures were already on the rise when COVID-19 struck but reached its peak in the responses of many countries to close their borders to slow down the spread of the pandemic. Other developments around the world, like Brexit, trade wars, economic recessions, political unrest, and rising individualism and nationalism can be considered as non-pandemic reasons driving deglobalization. The global village (McLuhan, 1962) has been transformed into a global online village, where online infrastructures, communications, and interactions have a pivotal role.

Based on the above arguments, it can be argued that the internalization of higher education will shrink due to travel bans/restrictions. Higher education institutions, whose financial stability relies heavily on international students, should develop new business models and find different sources of funding to survive. In line with these developments, virtual exchange programs will gain more importance and be more valuable. Moreover, higher education institutions will be forced to collaborate more, develop new services to compete, and utilize online spaces more efficiently.

New learning ecosystems: Digital transformation, digital ecosystems, and digital twins

“The biggest part of our digital transformation is changing the way we think.” – S. Preston

Many universities have already adopted digital transformation strategies as a way to be resilient in the digital knowledge age (Abad-Segura et al., 2020; Castro Benavides et al., 2020; Petkovics, 2018; Xiao, 2019), and this trend has now accelerated on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, digital ecosystems (Ficheman & de Deus Lopes, 2008) have emerged, and like natural ecosystems, they “consist of species, populations and communities interacting with each other and with the environment” (p. 9). The winds of change have now turned into a storm of change, with most higher education institutions being forced either to move their presences to digital environments or to create new digital identities. In creating a digital presence, a digital twin needs to be birthed (Batty, 2018; Datta, 2017; El Saddik, 2018); in other words, physical campuses are reproducing digital versions of themselves. This

requires that many educational theories be modified and integrated when adapting to the shifting landscape. This idea of virtual campuses being projections of physical campuses, that is digital twins, and built on the model of digital ecosystems prompts many questions. For instance - how will we regulate these spaces? how will learners form their digital identities? how will we ensure equity, equality and justice? how will we react to incidences of racial, religious, ethnic, social, and economic discrimination? and how will we ensure and enable efficient, effective, and sustainable teaching and learning processes? In short, in addition to the opportunities offered by digital campuses, there will be many challenges, challenges we must be proactive in addressing and managing.

The year 1984: Digital footprints, privacy concerns, surveillance, and ethics

“Every student is guilty until the algorithm proves her innocence” - Watters (2020)

It may be certainly comforting to accept that the year 2020 was awful but that next year, 2021, will be a better and happier year. Yet, as we are still in 2020, we must ask ourselves – are we entering 2021, or are we on the verge of descending into George Orwell’s 1984, a time which depicts a dystopian world and warns about totalitarianism and mass surveillance? Recent developments imply that we have reason to worry, particularly about a panoptical society which has been designed ‘to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).

In a panoptical society, where data that is distilled through surveillance is the new oil, beyond the unease over the collection and mining of digital footprints, violations of privacy, and mass surveillance, there is the concern that the imposition of these features of the panoptic society will gradually lead to our acceptance and normalization of them. However, despite these many concerns (Coghlan et al., 2020; Swauger, 2020), some people are willing to overlook them in exchange for making profit at all costs (Harwell, 2020). In education, students have been particularly affected by these issues, as they are under constant fear of being red flagged during online proctoring for appearing on the webcam in a different color or for failing to keep their eyes focused on the screen. Yet, it is not just the gathering of data and proctoring that raises questions, there are also the matters of ethics, ethical codes, and algorithmic bias, the last of which is a major issue of concern.

While regulations, like the GDPR in Europe, function as online safety measures, proctoring and surveillance strategies are constantly improving and thus, proactive measures need to be continually taken to protect learners. Moreover, some higher education institutions are aggressive in their adoption of the latest technologies and fail to put in the due diligence of identifying and applying the ethical codes to protect learners from the side-effects of proctoring and surveillance- related practices.

Last but not least, in many cases, it should be loudly articulated that the problems are not surveillance technologies, but how humans use them. While we understand how these technologies can be used to violate ethical principles, human nature is unpredictable and prone to getting stuck in the Stockholm Syndrome loop, where we keep on using technologies that only serve to harm us.

Higher education: The emperor has no clothes

“But he hasn't got anything on,” a little child said...

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered many facts that have hitherto been ignored. As we started wearing masks, the real features of higher education have been unmasked, and we can now see higher education with no clothes. And if higher education is naked, with nothing to cover its faults, we can and should shout out “the emperor has no clothes”.

In higher education, there are many issues that though known about for many years have never been addressed. For instance, higher education is not immune to capitalist approaches, as witnessed by the many universities that function as for-profit companies. Student debts are a major issue. It is nearly impossible to pursue higher education without financial support, a reality that stands in stark contrast to the universal values of education and further conflicts with basic human rights, which demand that every individual has the right to education. Furthermore, most higher education institutions depend on their funding from international students, yet as a result of deglobalization and the decrease in the number of international students due to border closures or political conflicts, many higher education institutions are at the risk of going bankrupt [like a company!]. This decrease in financial inputs directly affects the faculty, insofar as it threatens the loss of their jobs. In considering all these issues affecting the financial operation of higher education institutions, it is concerning to realize how directly tied they are to economics and finance. Yet, this issue does not affect some countries, particularly those where higher education is perceived as a public service and funded by the governments.

Another issue that has recently emerged is the role of higher education institutions; that is, is their main function to produce universal knowledge, prepare learners for life, or maintain a balance among these diverse roles? In carrying out these various roles, there has been a growing trend to unbundle, which refers to higher education institutions dispensing with specialization in each and every step of their services and outsource them in order to operate more efficiently.

It is high time for higher education to renew, recalibrate, and reposition itself in the educational landscape. This would require the institution of higher education to regenerate itself and be born again. Like the Phoenix (also known as: anqā, sīmorgh), it needs to rise from the ashes, but to do this, it must first face the flames.

Openness in education as the new business model

“Openness isn’t the end; it’s the beginning.” – M. Heffernan

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire educational landscape has needed educational resources capable of being shared among and within educational networks. In this regard, open educational resources (OERs) and open educational practices (OEPs) have played a significant role in ensuring the continuity of education (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Wetzler, 2020). Effort also needs to be directed to reducing social injustice, inequality and inequity in meeting educational needs. In the traditional business model, learning materials are copyrighted, meaning that the use of these materials requires permission from or a payment to the copyright holder. During emergency situations, like the COVID-19 crisis, copyrighted learning materials can be an obstacle to delivering educational content. Thus, OEP and OER must be encouraged, and initiatives to raise awareness and incentives should be developed to encourage educators to produce and use OER as a way to sustain OEP.

While the efforts and advocacy put forth for greater openness have been much appreciated, additional work is still needed in this area. For example, there is a need to develop repositories through which OERs can be organized, personalized, contextualized, and delivered (Van Allen & Katz, 2020). Openness will contribute to making the higher education ecosystem more resilient for future crises, and the sustainability of this ecosystem can be fueled by open-licensed inputs and outputs. However, given that the concept of openness is subject to interpretation, these practices should not be confined to a particular framework because the true nature of openness can be beyond the way we define them

Open educational practices in the wild: Unwitting and unintentional OEPs

"If it doesn't open, it is not your door." - Anonym

Who has ownership of knowledge and why is sharing, as a practice, important? Let's explore these questions by looking at the life of nomads. The origin of open education dates back far earlier than we imagine. While it is commonly believed that open education can be traced back to correspondence education, it was actually already available before that in unstructured forms. Long ago, there were two ways of living: Nomadic or settled. Nomads, for instance, do not settle down but rather, wander around to find resources and survive. Such a way of life made sharing an indispensable feature. They moved around in groups to collaborate and shared tools, crafts, experiences and knowledge. Storytelling was also vital for nomads, as it was one of ways they could transmit their cultural accumulation, knowledge, observations, and experiences from one generation to the next and thereby secure their survival and the preservation of universal values; knowledge was freely available to everyone.

The transition from nomadic life to settlements involved a significant amount of teaching and learning using different forms of soft and hard educational technologies. Yet with the limitations of primitive ways of teaching and learning, open educational practices, such as drawing pictures on cave walls, storytelling, and writing on blocks located in open public places and on parchment and papyrus, began to emerge as ways to share knowledge. From this, it is clear that open educational practices existed long before the introduction of digital forms as we know.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the OERs developed to serve OEP needs were not referred to as OERS nor properly licensed, despite being shared in offline and online communities (Bozkurt et al., 2020). These practices were in contrast to arguments stating that OER should function within the framework of the 5Rs, which refers to the retaining, reusing, revising, remixing, and redistribution of educational content (Wiley, n.d.; Wiley & Hilton III, 2018), and be freely available through open licenses such as Creative Commons; although truth be told, publicly available materials do not always require licensing for their use because being publicly available grants some invisible licenses by default.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been forced to revisit our early traditions, follow our instincts, share, and collaborate to survive, just like the nomads had to do. We have not let the idea of 'open' be strictly defined with the frameworks such as 5Rs, but rather, have instinctively, unwittingly, and unintentionally shared in order to survive these wild times. These diverse views and behaviors raise some critical questions: How do we define open[ness], and what does open[ness] mean and if it is indeed open, with many shades and greys, to what extent is it open?

Trauma informed pandemic pedagogy: Care and empathy

"Come, come, whoever you are" - Rumi

Referring to Bozkurt and Sharma's arguments (2020), "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" (p. iv), it can be suggested that care and empathy have prominent roles in times of trauma. SAMHSA (2014) defines trauma as "An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (p. 7). Given the effects that traumatic events can have on learners' well-being, we must be sure to create a warm climate and a welcoming space where we can listen, understand, respect, help, love and embrace them. Trauma-informed care and empathy-oriented pandemic pedagogy should focus on

achieving affective outcomes rather than on pedagogical outcomes, considering that cognition comes after emotion. Using didactic methods to push learners to learn more will not help them but only cause deeper wounds to open, and in the post-pandemic time, these deep wounds may manifest into acute forms of pain. Guided by the idea that we cannot open the doors of the mind unless we open the doors of heart, care- and empathy-centered approaches should be the default mode applied in education, both in the COVID and post-COVID world.

In this context, what should educators do? How can they create an ideal learning ecosystem? Dennen (2020) offers a good starting point by proposing that our educational understanding should be shaped by the following priorities: people should be first, content should be second, and technology should be third. In the end, technology and education are meant to be for the people and such an approach should “always be our mantra as educators” (Para, 7). We have to center our arguments on the human, not on the technology or the content.

All we need is the right mix: Toward a hybrid and blended modality in education

“Teachers can change lives with just the right mix of chalk and challenges.” – J. Meyer

How can we personalize distance education and how can we benefit from the theory and practice of distance education? The learning journey has many different paths, scenarios, and entry points. In this sense, following the new/next normal of the great online experiment, there will be a tendency to adopt blended or hybrid modes of education, which comes from the idea of blending the strengths of one type of mode and neutralizing the weaknesses of others. It is futile to compare face-to-face and distance education, as this is not a race between education modes but rather, a collaboration and cooperation between the two modes. The idea and intention are to make education as flexible as possible by giving more control, autonomy and independence to the learners and by making use of educational technology in a more effective way. Moreover, we argue that the crisis can be an opportunity for a renaissance in education. We can use alternative assessment and evaluation methods, benefit more from, e/m/u-learning, welcome micro credentials and empower virtual student mobility, and embrace informal learning as an extension of formal learning, which would require us to acknowledge and recognize prior learning.

Conclusion: Becoming the Alchemist

By its definition, an alchemist transforms or creates something through a seemingly magical process. In his magnum opus work, *The Alchemist*, Coelho (1993) narrates, “*When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it*”. He further suggests in the same work that “*It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting*”. Inspired by these words and the way alchemists are defined, it is our hope that educators will take the role of the alchemist and develop, refine, purify, and perfect the educational system to achieve a learning ecosystem that works for everyone. As educational alchemists, we should dream of a better future, fight for it, work for it to ensure that education evolves into its true, ideal form. Irrespective of the normal, new normal or next normal, education has always been the grounds of a shadow war between those who want to control masses and those who want to use education to liberate minds and hearts, or thoughts and souls. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a crisis for everyone, yet we can turn this crisis into an opportunity by reimagining, redesigning and recalibrating education to make it accessible, equitable, and inclusive, to free knowledge, democratize societies, eliminate inequality, inequity and injustice, and give agency and independency to learners so that they can navigate, traverse and pollinate multiple paths, dimensions and layers of a true learning ecology, where learners can find their true selves.

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