Home schooling, hybrid-learning and class room teaching: is COVID-19 changing things for good?

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Following the COVID-19 outbreak one year ago, all countries and their education systems in the Danube Region began adopting to the new reality. Hopes were high in spring 2020 that things would look rosier after the long summer break, badly awaited by stressed-out students, teachers and parents alike. In retrospect not surprisingly, things took longer than anticipated. And whilst an end to the pandemic might be far ahead, it is anywhere but near, and education in these circumstances remains under stress.

One needs to be brave to see the positive aspects and the opportunities due to COVID-19 arising for formal education, but there will be a time when these months will be seen as a disruption allowing for change. Thus, this paper sets out to deliberately strike a more optimistic tone: what will have happened to the many different education-realities in the Danube Region, once COVID-19 is no longer the dominating factor in everyday planning? European Commission 2020 public consultation results show almost all respondents consider that this crisis marks a point of no return for how technology is used in education and training. Will COVID-19 change the way teaching is done for good?

Four aspects in this transition, in which under huge pressure necessary adjustments were made to go from classroom teaching to distance learning come into focus: the role of teachers, the discussions around pragmatic and practical questions of education, rather than on content, the technical aspects of the recent months, and the confusing multitude of opportunities that are linked to digitalization.

Teachers once again between scapegoats and heroes

Teachers as public servants are duty-bound. Following the first wave and what felt like a grace-period, more and more education systems obliged their teachers to teach. Teachers had to stand in classrooms, exposed to a multitude of contacts with often inadequate, if at all, protection measures in place. Teachers and other system-relevant professionals in economy and medical professions – still predominantly female - shared this exposure, and the comparatively low pay. The public pressure to keep schools open is high, especially after the lockdowns have shed light on the downsides of homeschooling – on both children and parents. Students in an unsupportive environment are at even greater risk to fall behind when they learn from home. In the Danube Region countries (and beyond) women, and single-parents in particular, are affected by extra care-work. Therefore, opening schools have become a political credo, and pressure on teachers has increased.

On the one hand, the pandemic clearly uncovers existing weaknesses of education systems and their staff. On the other hand, the necessary boost of digital skills amongst teachers has shown a positive side-effect. Distance learning on a joint platform requires coordination of homework, deadlines and a standardization of communication channels. The pandemic also reveals school managements resisting necessary change in order to come to solutions – it lays bare ill performances that previously existed, with

individual teachers not striving to make their subject understandable, teachers who are not interested whether or not their students succeed.

Overall, distance learning is considered to work. Teachers note the polite and caring netiquette amongst students, reflecting the binding-together experience under the overall pressure this pandemic means in everyday life for each individual. Teachers are better visible again in their role of accompanying children and youth not only through the classes, but as giving orientation for personal development and providing families with a reliable day structure.

Hybrid and Distance learning – cons, but also pros

Distance learning generated a wealth of experience with alternative teaching methods. And whilst there might be more room for experiments, the margin of error in education remains tight because of the current strong public attention for schools and curricula. Some ideas however gained ground and are likely to inspire change, like the "flipped classrooms". The idea itself is not new: Individual teachers make their subject material available online, learning takes place at home in a semi-self-directed manner and students can approach the material in their own rhythm, independent of time and location. Classroom-teaching is then solely used for asking questions in order to understand complex issues – and for practicing what has been learned. Main learnings acquired by all at home by themselves can jointly be applied or explored deeper. This concept has by now been used in many countries and circumstances, allowing for vivid exchange on best practice amongst teachers, not only school-wide, but going well beyond. A less radical concept is a mere organizational issue: classes are being split into smaller groups, and these groups take turns in being taught at school, or from home via distance learning. This helps to reduce the social contacts.

Though e-learning might be more established and not considered exotic or worth less any longer, there are downsides. Social security is an obvious prerequisite for quality education, and for necessary self-perception in learning. It is still predominantly in the classroom that students at risk learn to solve conflicts by words and not by violence. And not to forget: Time and concentration in a quiet surrounding, a good place to learn at home, is required from all students alike. What COVID-19 and connected changes achieve for sure is that they bring flaws to light and show mercilessly the failures and omittances of huge school systems in need of reform.

Black Boards and Learning Management Systems

Tech talk risks being distant from many students´ realities. Is there a computer or tablet at home that can be used? If there are siblings, do they need – or have – a device, too? Or is it that the mother, father – or both – have to use the one family computer to work from home? Looking for possible achievements also means turning from hard- to software issues. When lockdowns were introduced, several technical solutions were already available, commercial as well as open source. And in this situation, companies wanted to gain market share. Even commercial learning apps, as well as individual publishers, offered discounts or free versions to attract new customers in search for a digital tool.

Often, the established Learning Management Systems (learning platform, LMS)/Moodle/ Microsoft Teams and Skype were picked at first. But due to the relatively short period in which distance learning had to be organized under pressure, too often there was no consensus upon a standard LMS to be used by all teachers in a school. More centralized education systems also needed long to work out solutions. Open-Source-platforms fre-

quently used in Austria like Moodle-based Eduvidual or commercial Schoolfox struggled to keep up with the demand. As of now, more and more countries of the Danube Region introduce certified learning-platforms following centralized benchmarks, targets and monitoring strategies, as well as resources to professionally train the educators in using these.

And while the responsibility for education and training systems lies with each country and EU Member State – or even below, on a federal level - the EU is an actor in this, too. It is supportive in setting-up a European Education Area to strengthen educational outcomes and to promote common values. Within the European Education Area, the recently published Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) outlines the European Commission's vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe. It intends to harvest the learnings from these disruptive months, with their unprecedented usage of IT at schools – and in doing so, it wants to add to more digitally-fit education systems in its member countries.

Bits, bytes and… paper

One might wonder that distance and hybrid learning can be surprisingly analogue, too. It is not uncommon for teachers to print their students´ homework, and students working with paper provided by teacher or school instead of using digital files on the computer send by mail or provided via LMS. With lockdown measures in place, exchange, questions and control of these learning sheets took place via more familiar means: Whatsapp, Skype. However, internet (or network) connectivity and an accordingly ready device remain prerequisites. In a wealthy country like Austria, a printer at home is needed for many – homework is done manually on printouts, they are being scanned and returned by e-mail.

Not every child has a computer or tablet, let alone a printer, but little doubt is cast that every household in the Danube Region possesses a television. During lockdown, it was often public television channels in the region that showed their – sometimes forgotten or overshadowed – convening power by offering special education, i.e., teaching programs for children and youth. Taken the vastly different realities schools, teachers and students in the Danube Region work with, this underlines the many options there are when organizing distance learning.

Summing up, there are developments that were either triggered or strengthened by the pandemic that are appreciated inside and outside of the educational systems in the Danube Region. Importance and responsibility of the teaching profession are back in the public attention, at least for a while, and open up a window to improve employment conditions. Hybrid and distance learning do result in a higher exposure to previously less-used methods, with the best-liked ideas likely to remain. A long-needed debate about LMS including the security of personal data has begun receiving public attention. And the perception of distance-learning as being solely tablet- or computer based has received viable new input and aspects. Whilst it is too early to compare pre- and post COVID-19 education systems, opportunities for improvement arise - what might become the brighter side of this epochal crisis.

PS: Recommendations

1. **Keep schools and their working conditions in the critical public eye**
   It became ever more apparent how central schools are to societal functioning & well-being. Discourse and the necessity to adopt will eventually lead to movement in educational reform. Whether or not these reforms will revolve around digitization is unclear yet, but it will entail elements thereof. Fair pay for teachers will be one element contributing to an increased attractivity of this profession.

2. **Re-think educational goals**
   This crisis is not only an opportunity to modernize schools and class rooms, but also to tackle the really big goals: Schools and education systems should be considered a success when inequalities are spotted and erased, and when all children are reached and supported according to their full abilities. And whilst students are using all sorts of apps to learn and to communicate right now, they need to be educated in digital basics, too. Now is the time to add this to the curricula of the region.

3. **Teacher training sound and fair**
   There is hope that the teacher lone-fighter syndrome becomes a rarity after the pandemic. The joint problem solving, coordination and intense communication to get things done need to be kept and incentivized. Considerable planning should now be put in place that this does not risk getting lost again, once schools operate in a way that is closer to what we believe where the good old days. They were probably not. More teacher support is needed, and these plans ought to be drafted now. They must include a broad range of digitization issues.

4. **Political and administrative decision makers – decide and share**
   It is the time to decide how to proceed after the pandemic (or, during the next pandemic). What can be kept, what needs to go - the unclear future circumstances and the current attention for school related issues might not appeal to decision makers, but teachers need certainty now. Working groups of teaching professionals need to come up with binding recommendations which LMS to use, and how digital progress will be monitored. Structures need to be in place to reward teachers with outstanding skills in this respect. The consequences of COVID-19 are so complex that it can be mind-boggling – but we still lack a concerted approach in the Danube Region to share best practices. Schools must not be left alone; they need access to cross-border learning systems.

PPS: Teacher Training by IDM

The Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, IDM, organized an advanced training seminar for teachers of the primary and secondary level as well as for the interested public, in cooperation with the Institute for Geography and Regional Research of the University of Vienna and the University College of Teacher Education Vienna/Krems (KPH). Titled "Democracy in Crisis? Challenges and opportunities for the Danube region", participants could not but discuss possible effects the pandemic has had on the education system. An outstanding example for media communication, awareness raising and initiatives to strengthen liberal democracy via distance learning, the virtual Democracy Workshops (www.demokratiewebstatt.at) generated a lot of interest and triggered debate.

More Information: shorturl.at/vCERZ

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