Virtual schooling, Covid-gogy and digital fatigue

Parents around the world are attempting to home school their children for the first time, as the COVID-19 pandemic forces school closures in more than 180 countries. Dr Giota Alevizou, a digital culture and education scholar based at The Open University's Knowledge Media Institute (KMi) reflects on the unexpected challenges of digital education in 'lockdown.'

With official "social distancing" gaining necessary pace globally, the boom we are seeing in the use of technologies and techniques that connect us, shows that neither the *social* nor *learning* are things that we can afford to give up.

As universities, colleges and schools strive to pivot to virtual learning environments on very short notice, the world's premier educational, cultural and media institutions have 'opened up' their virtual doors to a multitude of educational resources and courses alike. Meanwhile, celebrity mathematicians and authors are racing to teach the UK's children, and body coaches are becoming global physical educational phenomena on YouTube.

Juggling an ocean of resources and measures to cope with new routines of-all-family-at-home-working, virtual home-schooling, as well as immediate professional, financial and health anxieties, I have experienced equal doses of gratitude and digital fatigue – a fatigue for constantly being required to be online and plugged in. I have been overwhelmed by a sense of overload from media, resources and messages, but also from the impeding priorities of 'digital' pedagogies. As this imposed – yet necessary – confinement has compelled me to reflect on what converging new roles of digital parenting and schooling may mean, I – like other digital learning and online education researchers – am reminded of some surprisingly sound advice: do less.

As a parent, I feel fortunate that my child's primary school is critically and creatively considering a host of challenges — infrastructural, pedagogical and socio-economic — to build a simple, personal (aka 'school-made'), accessible yet committed virtual environment. An environment that strives to maintain some sort of structure (for children and parents alike), a sense of normality through contact with teachers who care and are mindful of all those children who physically need them and who they may not be able to reach.

Unlike many others, who opted for 'closed' proprietary tools, this school's resources are open for others schools and parents to consult or (re)use. With teachers and schools being also at the front line of heroic service during the pandemic, I too strive to use my research in digital media and experience in provision of online open education to structure my reflections as a parent, teacher and researcher. The few observations and concerns about this immediate experience of digital schooling that follow are by no means exhaustive.

Learning at a distance: novel tensions between artificial and collective intelligence?

Historically, the association of distance education with media organizations and technologies (notably exemplified through The Open University/BBC partnership) used to address two basic aspects: firstly, pragmatic (modes of instruction and delivery, affordable and convenient access); and, secondly, a social, egalitarian ethos. The latter has been associated with cultural pedagogies, alternative curricula, community education and independent learning. More recently, the merging of open education with 'online technologies' and social media (ranging from Massive Open Online Courses, to 'open study communities' and popular portals ranging from YouTube Edu and Khan Academy, to mention a few) have been approached as sites of opportunity and ambiguity, pushing the boundaries of institutions, professional communities and the students who inhabit them. At the centre of this ambiguity have been both opportunities for alternative public learning, and risks against datafication and marketization of higher education. While many HEIs offer a multitude of 'open courses' and have been dealing with blended learning approaches, as well as having sophisticated EdTech to Learning Management Systems (VLEs) to support a complete transition to online, the logistics and pedagogy of distance learning are indeed very different from that of face-to-face teaching.

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For schools, the challenges are even greater: even if schools use platforms for online learning resources and management of assessment, the practicalities and pedagogies of 'distance learning' are far more complex. Experts like Rose Luckin from UCL's Institute of Education, for example, have recently warned that "very few primary schools have the sophisticated technology and support needed to adequately implement online learning platforms", and, that online transition may result in "disadvantaged learners [becoming] even more disadvantaged". Teachers too have become overstretched with new shifts and routines, learning new tools and everyday online content creation, while they become increasingly anxious about the ways in which they can cater for the wellbeing of students and younger children online, especially those with special education and health needs. They even engage more in a kind of 'covid-gogy': juggling catering for the practical needs of vulnerable families, the emotional pragmatic needs of key workers' children at school, and, finally inspiring the children at home through online classes.

The scale of both digital and socio-economic inequalities may become ever more challenging if we consider global figures. Even before the closure of British schools on 20 March, the United Nations had reported that school closures in 13 countries were already disrupting the education of 290 million students globally: "a figure without precedent."

At the same time, responding to requests for urgent measures, several AI-driven learning platforms for schools, including the British-based Century, Microsoft's FlipGrid, and US-based Edmodo have considered offering free access to their services. This comes after the exponential growth of AI in education, with hundreds of start-ups competing to offer solutions to schools in the UK and worldwide, has led many to raise concerns, not only about the pedagogical suitability or effectiveness of such systems, but also ethical risks surrounding the possible hyper-automation of teaching and learning (for a comprehensive review, see Nesta's 'Educ-AI-tion Rebooted').

So, notwithstanding the tensions between the interface of learning online and the pedagogy of distant learning, our current unique circumstances lend themselves to more pressing questions to direct research and immediate, collective response:

- What could the impact on students at schools with fewer resources be and, is the potential of the pandemic likely to widen the already rife digital and socio-economic divides in education?
- What kinds of measures and safeguards could be best used to mitigate potential consequences related to using online media, digital platforms and AI-based technologies for schooling at the times of the pandemic?
- How can parents and teachers be better equipped to collaborate in order to better serve "learning companions" — offering feedback on tasks, suggested educational resources, and activities, but also providing caring and supporting emotional well-being?
- What sort of crucial and alternative curricula or literacies need to be brought forward during this crisis and what methods and pedagogies should be developed to equip teachers and students alike with resilience capacities for the aftermath of the crisis?

We first need to have a wider conversation about the values that we want technology and digital media help promote.

Re-enforcing critical media and digital literacies at a time when we need to stop time

As our roles converge at multiple levels and our anxiety about future scenarios and inequalities during lockdown excarberates, we may want to use this time to engage in a wider (digital) conversation about the values we want technologies to enact and the kinds of literacies our children may need to make sense of the (digital) realities that surround our world.

We may want to replace the pre-Covid-19 emphasis of the National Curriculum on computing or coding skills with a call to enhance human creativity, which would inspire young people to engage in creative work – even for mainstream subjects. We may need to re-introduce data and media literacies to enable children and young people to assess biases embedded in data perhaps in gaming-playing or social media, and to help them develop a better understanding of digital and (co)creative rights for navigating broader digital environments. Properly evaluating online content can also be included in inviting them to watch child-friendly news together, or asking them to assess the evidence in the information that their parents share so easily in Whatsapp groups.

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'Media literacy efforts really can work in schools, communities, and families,' particularly in light of the Covid-19 fake-news upward spiral, Sonia Livingstone argues, offering a multitude of suggestions to families: from figuring out child-friendly trustworthy information and news sites (like BBC's Newsround), to empowering young people to develop critical judgement (see Full Fact, BBC's iReporter game the Guardian's fake or real, Bitesize Fact or Fake?).

A final note. Often, health threats and fear of illness makes us want to stop time. If stopping time is imposed upon us, then we might as well take advantage of it to humbly embrace our humanity and to care for ourselves, our children and others – even from a distance – who need our caring more than ever before. While we are asked to distance ourselves from each other, we may be too sharing experiences of confusion and chaos leading us to improvise on temporary solutions. Though such moments unite us on a global scale with shared fears, restrictions and realities, we also are not all going into this moment on equal grounds. As every threat shakes the foundational structures in our society, there are those among us who entered this moment more vulnerable than others and who will require varied types and different levels of care. It's about time that we all engage in a pedagogy that makes the share of that responsibility more equal.

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