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Critical Change in the Educational Landscape: Reimagining, Reengineering, and Redesigning a Better Future

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, the entire globe is in the middle of a transition process owing to the forced impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that has urged us to change radically and critically. Motivated by the need to understand ongoing changes, this editorial intends to surface crucial issues that can possibly impact and shape the educational landscape and its future. In this sense, this editorial sees the COVID-19 pandemic as a triggering event and explores issues that are significant for educational systems. In essence, the normal as we knew it was problematic and the crisis that emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity to transform the educational systems that were accustomed to rigid structures.

Keywords: the COVID-19 pandemic, critical change, teaching and learning, online learning, educational change

Introduction: Towards New Horizons

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." — Charles Darwin

Change is constant and inevitable! The driving forces can be internal (e.g., our social needs, physiological status, etc.) or external motives (e.g., pandemics, wars, civil unrest, economic turmoils, etc.). In fact, the whole globe has recently witnessed how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced us to change and reinterpret normal as we know it. The impact of the pandemic was so great in depth and breadth that Time Magazine (2020) attributed the end of the second decade of the new millennium as *The Great Reset*. Supporting this notion, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020a) further argued 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" (p. 1). These developments suggest that we need to change radically and critically if we want to reimagine, reengineer, and redesign a better future, not just for some, but for everyone.

Change During the New Normal: Adaptation as a Radical and Critical Agent

Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) are terms that can be used to define the current century (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the characteristic features of the VUCA world. Higher Education (HE) is not immune to the requirements of the changing world (Fischer et al., 2020) and the current state of the art leads us to reconsider and reposition HE (Sutton & Jorge, 2020). As a matter of fact, the forced change stemming from the pandemic did not introduce new problems. It revealed already existing problems that the HE system has been facing (Mascolo, 2020; Nandy et al., 2020). We have witnessed that digital technology and technology-integrated solutions were effective to fight and cope with the pandemic (Dwivedi et al., 2020) and we learned by experience that digital skills and literacies are crucial to operate and advance in a digitally intensive era (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). On the other hand, the pandemic has also reminded us that humans are biological beings (Mascolo, 2020) and technology can be useful only to some extent. The human capacity for resilience (Talanquer et al., 2020) and ability to adapt to changing environments and conditions is our biggest strength, and it is a vital skill in which humans still outperform technology and technology-mediated tools and processes (Fischer et al., 2020). Importantly, the blind devotion or even worship of technologies (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2022) and the heavy reliance on digital technologies increase the risk of techno-capitalism (Gurukkal, 2020; Teräs et al., 2020), which, in turn, can result in side effects and collateral damages in the long run (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2022).

In this context, this editorial will explore education in both HE and K-12 and the state of scholarship with an aim to better understand the radical and critical changes. However, our intention is not to provide a complete picture, but to provide a justification implying that we need to prepare a future research agenda to be better prepared for the changing world and call on any stakeholders in the educational landscape to collaboratively shape it.

The Turning Point for Higher Education: Reviving Universitas Magistrorum et Scholarium

The institution of higher education has long faced criticism around its educational and scholarly practices, and the COVID-19 pandemic served as a benchmarking test to show where it succeeded and where it failed. HE had created a status quo for face-to-face designs that were upended, but with the easing of health restrictions, there are indicators that the sector is returning to prioritize its on-campus activities. While it is ideally expected that HE would facilitate inquiry, reason, and scientifically proven knowledge in addition to fostering and encouraging innovative ideas, the truth is the opposite in many cases. Higher education has been criticized for being extremely quantified and datafied for a long time. It has now been turned into a mechanical monster that is controlled and directed by external motives rather than the aforementioned universal ideals. The current state of higher education is being impacted by the effects of globalization with venture capitalists transforming the sector into a financial market, and knowledge emerging as a financial for-profit asset. Currently, almost the entire higher education system is drowning in issues such as student debts, datafied decisions, market-oriented visions, the need for research grants to survive, publishing articles in journals listed by prestigious indexes just to be listed in the global ranks,, and the human condition being forgotten.

Perhaps, there is no single formula to save HE and academia, but we can start with revisiting who we are and what we truly stand for. The term university roots from the Latin words, *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, to refer to *a community of teachers and scholars*. That means, as a community, we have to value the individuals that constitute our community, which further justifies humanizing our core principles that shape and direct our decisions. If we remember that the ultimate purpose is to advance society by pursuing, generating, and disseminating knowledge and pushing the boundaries to think outside of the box, we can take a small but critical step whose ripples eventually affect and influence the larger community and then society. In all, we need to stop fueling the giant mechanical HE monster, identify a new roadmap in pursuit of empirically validated knowledge, and adopt a more humanized approach considering that we are living in a community and communities are composed of human agents. As humans, communities, and societies, we have to remember the true purpose for the HE landscape and how it can be achieved following the core principles for the advancement of individuals, communities, and societies.

Teaching and Learning at K-12: Schools Beyond Educational Provisions

The pandemic caused tectonic shifts not only in higher education, but also at the K-12 level. It was seen that teaching and learning activities are not necessarily confined to school grounds, but they expand to our daily lives. As schools with no previous digital learning strategy struggled to implement the online, hybrid, or multi-access learning designs needed for learners, they discovered, through trial and error, the real social ramifications for learners and their families. From challenging pick-up and drop-off schedules to disengaged learners and overwhelmed teachers and staff, it was both a time where sudden hope emerged that new flexible designs could move forward, but this was juxtaposed against the quick realization of failures to meet learner needs for food, safety, or basic access to technology. The strategic role of schools as a critical social net was highlighted during the pivot. Pedagogies of care emerged as a fundamental approach for humanizing teaching and learning. While most brick-and-mortar schools have returned to regular face-to-face designs, the need for flexibility will always exist to provide an inclusive teaching and learning environment.

Libraries and Librarianship in a Time of Infodemic

Being closed down to keep the social distance during the pandemic, delivering services at a distance, and working remotely affected libraries and librarianship. Consequently, they faced a lot of challenges such as human and infrastructural issues, workplace anxiety and stress, infodemic and changed information-seeking behavior, and lastly leadership and planning (Ashiq et al., 2022). The role of the libraries changed significantly, and they put in a lot of effort to raise awareness about public health and well-being, to support learners, teachers, and researchers to provide reference and document delivery services (Ali, & Gatiti, 2020; Yuvaraj, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic was also an infodemic (Naeem, & Bhatti, 2020) and libraries and librarians had a critical role in fighting misinformation (Chisita, & Ngulube, 2022) and filtering fake information (Yuvaraj, 2020). In fact, the pandemic has fundamentally changed information-seeking behaviors of individuals (Rafiq et al., 2021) and this highlighted the need for the digital transformation (Bozkurt, & Sharma, 2022) to survive in online spaces.

The role of the libraries is critical as they serve on the front lines, yet it is also obvious that they need to develop new strategies and new service models in a changing world, especially one that prioritizes the fight against disinformation, misinformation, and fake news.

Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning: Towards an Emerging Discipline

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNDP, 2022), adopted in 2015, envisions "sustainable, universal and ambitious development, a program of the people, by the people, and for the people." (UNESCO, 2022, para. 1). Goal 4, Quality Education, targets ensuring free, inclusive, equitable, and quality education for everyone. This goal hopes to ensure the sustainability of education. The COVID-19 pandemic, in fact, justified this noble cause and reminded us, through experience, that we need emergency action plans to sustain education at all costs.

Upon the onset of the pandemic, in the midst of uncertainty, emergency remote teaching and learning were implemented across the world as a temporary solution (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b; Hodges et al., 2020). It should by now hopefully be known that online education is and intentionally-designed activity, which is grounded in theoretical and practical knowledge, while emergency remote teaching and learning is a mandatory, survival mode of education implemented through reaction in times of crisis, including offline and/or online tools (Bozkurt et al., 2020). However, beyond the temporary nature of emergency remote teaching and learning (Bozkurt, 2022; Moore et al., 2021), it is still subject to questioning just how ready we are for the next crisis in the educational landscape.

Education was not interrupted for the first time, and it would be naive to assume that there will not be a next crisis. History tends to repeat itself, as we have already seen that the globe went through similar experiences during the 20th century (e.g., Spanish Flu, WWI, WWII, etc.) and we still see many local or global interruptions in the 21st century (e.g., wars, civil wars, political upheavals, social turmoils, refugee waves, climate crises, economic recessions, etc.). Current organizational structures are inadequate to respond to such interruptions (Mithani, 2020) and recent undesirable developments (Jandrić, 2022) further justify that we need better mechanisms for dealing with interruptions of education in emergency situations. Our field has long called for action to develop and strengthen educational models not for temporary solutions, but for working solutions

developed on solid grounds. It is perhaps the right time to move on from emergency remote teaching and learning as a disposable educational model to a working flexible model integrated into our day-to-day operations that can be flexed when our society needs it.

Final Remarks: Raising Radical and Critical Questions

The purpose of this editorial is to encourage ourselves as a global society to consider a better future, to trigger thought-provoking ideas to facilitate innovation, and to remind ourselves that we have flaws and bleeding wounds in our social structures. We can approach the transition period that the pandemic forced upon us and be empowered to raise some radical and critical questions.

The pandemic will be over at some point in the future, but will we forget all these losses and pains and move forward as if nothing has happened? Will we go back to normal as we know and stay inside of our comfort zones? Will we revive the original educational institutions for the greater good of our global society, or let it be the giant mechanical monster that erodes our core universal principles? Will we adopt the philosophy of openness to liberate knowledge and democratize education? Will we adopt learner-centered, humanized learning processes at all levels or let the colonized pedagogies continue to harm our collectively built social and scholarly capitals? Responding to these questions can be passive and performative for minimal effect, but collectively our answers combined with our actions can make an impact. Together, we can reimagine, reengineer, and redesign a better future to advance our educational institutions. Our small individual ripples can grow, be felt, seen, and encourage others to contribute, so collectively we make a global impact. We hope to see you at OTESSA 2023, where the theme is appropriately named *Reckonings and Re-Imaginings!*

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