

Experiences and Pedagogical Reflections on Virtual Teaching Practice in Mexico

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Abstract

Digital platforms help us establish sociocultural and educational communication with the ethical *other*. They have facilitated pedagogical follow-up for our students during the pandemic period through the intermediation of the digital interface and the emerging pedagogical mediation of students' parents. With the purpose of acquiring data regarding the everyday experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic to draw valuable insights for the context of the Mexican basic education system, a survey was developed and implemented with active teachers across various regions. This paper summarizes their experiences, exploring their challenges and roles during the global health crisis.

Keywords: Virtual Teaching, Teaching Practice, Teachers' Education, COVID-19, Mexico

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Introduction

Currently, satellite communication and digital information are part of our everyday lives, affecting how we relate to others and how we do our jobs. When it comes to educating the youth, teachers have faced an increasing demand to become integrated into digital culture and the newest platforms of communication. There is also a demand to learn and adopt digital resources and other technological tools for the purpose of professional development.

Virtual and remote education is understood today as a way of teaching and learning with the use of digital knowledge networks. The pedagogical link is constructed through a computer, from the image created by the intermediation of the face constructed by the subject, beyond its corporality. In fact, it can be said that in virtual teaching practice, a third actor is formed. In other words, a virtual *third body*. This is a representation that only exists in the brain of the teacher and the student; it is constructed by digital image and sound.

As a result of my responsibility as a professor of postgraduate studies in Education within the Mexican education system, I have had to learn (since 1989) and adopt several different tools to support my teaching practice. These tools include the projector, the personal computer, the Internet, laptops, iPads, tablets, and smartphones.

Based on these previous experiences, I conducted a test run (*réunion zéro*) with three of my postgraduate students on Friday, March 27th. The following sessions of our postgraduate course were undertaken in the form of a seminar—which worked similar to a regular classroom session, except confined to our homes—maintaining the workflow of theme-oriented presentations (*diaporamas*). In each of the sessions, there was a space for group discussions and explanations, while emphasizing controversial talking points to build up to a consensus or conclusion toward the end of each session. Other teachers—both at the preschool and elementary school levels—tasked their students with homework for a month (from March 20th all the way to April 20th). This proved to be insufficient, given that the social isolation period was originally extended until April 30th and was eventually extended further in Mexico.

The question that we should ask ourselves is this: How did teachers experience this period of social isolation? They remained at home, trying to stay in touch with their students through the Internet or perhaps coordinated with their students' parents (in the case of preschool children) via social networks or telephone.

The Pedagogical Problem Within the Context of Social Distancing

With the purpose of acquiring data regarding the everyday experiences of teachers in higher education in Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and Spain, considering the context of the Mexican basic education system (which comprises preschool and elementary school), I have undertaken the task of designing and distributing a survey to explore the aforementioned topic, which is aimed at preschool educators and elementary school teachers.

This survey consisted of seven brief questions on five main topics, namely, a) the experience of isolation, b) personal and professional concerns, c) educational and pedagogical practices, d) learning during the period of social distancing, and e) final reflections and conclusions. It should be noted that this survey was sent to 20 educators and colleagues on April 1st, 2020,

including my postgraduate students. I received a swift reply from my colleagues in Chile, Colombia, and Spain, whose ideas and reflections are included in the present text.

According to the data gathered, while technological resources and tools are useful under such circumstances—i.e., global health crises—the general sentiment is that human contact in the classroom and teachers' personalized attention for students to achieve their learning goals are irreplaceable.

Empathetic education, through its social, socializing and integrating forces (Spain), loses strength as a result of social distancing measures. This is partly owed to the fact that through a computer screen, interactive creativity is rendered sterile (Chile), especially for those who do not possess the minimum resources to receive proper pedagogic support. However, in the case of students in Mexico, stakeholders have displayed a wealth of improvisation techniques to adapt to the circumstances—e.g., students submitting their tasks through email or WhatsApp in the absence of virtual videoconferencing platforms.

My colleague, Rolando Pinto of the University of Playa Valparaíso (UPLA) in Chile, notes that in his country, there has been a great deal of suffering over the social distancing measures, emphasizing the government's lack of precision and political competence strengthening the Chilean education system through the ongoing health crisis. By their own volition, professors like him have been using the same digital communication platforms available to most students, such as WhatsApp, email services, as well as cellphone calls and text messages. To conduct formal postgraduate master's sessions, Dr. Pinto prepares virtual classes through the EDU-Aula system made available and created by the UPLA.

When it comes to the teaching praxis, Dr. Pinto emphasizes that through virtual education, the essence of face-to-face teaching is lost, because there is a degradation in interaction (Spain) and in argumentative thinking (Chile). Thus, the wealth of professional pedagogic practice as a performance (with its corresponding emerging *avatars*) is lost (Colombia). Dr. Pinto notes that, beyond the affirmations (attributed to Chomsky in some cases) that the coronavirus has a military, economic, or political origin (and other conspiracy theories of this kind), it is crucial to remember Freire's (1977) critical pedagogy. From this perspective, the silencing the other is a manner of oppression, doubly perverse because it does not allow for living communication and it castrates affection. In this vein, Escobar Guerrero (2007) argues that:

The pedagogy of the oppressed is a hymn to love, a challenge that calls to break the chains of oppression, a belief made struggle in the human capacity to put biophilia (Eros) before necrophilia (Tanathos), and to set forth on a journey toward liberation, thus assuming the commitment of humanization, knowing that no one frees oneself on their own; instead we are freed in communion, mediated by the world, by history, and by our culture.

In other words, human beings—particularly teachers—need the other to communicate, interact with, and challenge; we learn *with* the other; we reflect *with* the other; with the other we build that much needed dialectic relationship of the everyday but also the pedagogical relationship, within school or a discussion group. This is how we build, piece by piece, trust and hope (Freire, 2007, p. 105), which are necessary ingredients of any education aimed toward freedom.

Educators in Isolation

Of a total of 20 surveys sent to an equal number of postgrad students, only 10 were returned. With the data gathered, I was able to build a more or less cohesive compendium of ideas regarding stakeholders' experiences of the pandemic during the social isolation period. It should be noted that this information displays, simultaneously, the perspective of basic education professionals (preschool and elementary school teachers), parents, children, and master's students.

Before going forward with the specific analysis of the ideas and input of the students and former students of the postgraduate program in Education, I have deemed it convenient to include some of the observations made by a rural educator in elementary school. These observations were put forth by my colleague, the educator Dr. Sergio Aguilar Reveles, from the state of Zacatecas in Mexico, whom I visited in his small rural preschool on March 17th before social isolation policies came into effect in Mexico.

Dr. Aguilar works with multilevel groups in the rugged and rocky landscape of the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range. I made the visit as part of a school tour, named "*El Circuito de la Ciencia*" (The Science Circuit), which I carried out. This formidable rural teacher (who possesses a PhD) argues that the digital realm has helped maintain a much-needed connection between teachers, students, and parents, while simultaneously imposing a stringent restriction on human interaction, which is by itself an emotionally complex process.

Given the characteristics of the rural educator's profession, before closing the school (where he is a principal), in El Tambor, Zacatecas, Dr. Aguilar assigned his students homework for a period initially contemplated to last a month (from the 20th of March to the 20th of April), pointing out that students had to use the workbook as a support according to their level. However, after the period of social isolation was extended, Dr. Aguilar had to find a way to provide them with further schoolwork instructions, taking into consideration that it is a rural community without the same available digital resources that those of urban centers.

Now, in line with our original intention to show the reader the input of the educators under my supervision (both current and former students of the postgraduate Education course), their contributions will be grouped according to the five themes mentioned at the beginning of this text.

Personal and Professional Experiences of the Pandemic

The implementation of lockdown measures was a sudden process—and, in many respects, unforeseen—that put to the test educators' ability to adapt and devise adequate pedagogical strategies to educate children under social isolation. Meanwhile, it should be noted that these children were at home with their families (which is positive) but they were also tasked with housework that they did not have to do before (which may have been detrimental to their learning process).

Educators also experienced the fear that their families could become while buying and doing other essential activities. However, carrying out these activities required the constant reminder to follow government policies regarding personal hygiene and social distancing. Further, in some cases, social distancing presented additional problems, from a pedagogical standpoint.

The main problem was that these educators, as many people worldwide, experienced considerable anxiety as a result of being confined over a long period of time. However, these teachers found a way to cope with the circumstances presented by the health crisis but and the psychological pressure of mandatory isolation. In the case of pregnant educators and postgraduate students, the uncertainty and fear of infection was especially burdensome.

There was also an evident shift in everyday habits. For teachers whose children studied a different level from the one they were teaching, they had to serve a dual role as educators for both their students and their own children, supporting them through homework to contribute to their learning process from home. Consequently, most of the educators surveyed pointed out that they relied on social media and other communications methods (WhatsApp, Facebook, email, phone, Facetime, Skype, and Zoom) for their everyday activities.

From the Personal to the Professional

It is evident that educators' main concern, in all cases, was the fear that their families and students could become infected. Similarly, they expressed concern regarding students' lack of proper support at home, given that not all parents had the resources for digital communication, much less the professional background to provide their children with pedagogical support.

This is why educators became concerned with whether their students had sufficient information on COVID-19's dangers. Similarly, they were concerned with the prospect of the long-term economic impact that the health crisis would have on the economy due to the closing of businesses. This was especially the case for educators who worked part-time in such businesses (e.g., stationary stores, cafés or bakeries) during the pandemic.

Specifically, within the Mexican context, teachers were concerned with the further degradation of economic stability as a result of the massive unemployment that would result from many informal businesses being unable to recover. Moreover, some of the educators worked in private institutions that became threatened by the looming probability of a massive economic recession.

As postgraduate students, the respondents reported feeling worried that they were incapable of carrying out their courses and seminars normally in a classroom setting because no matter how many digital platforms were available, they were at the mercy of the stability of their connection to the Internet, which in many cases was poor. Furthermore, one cannot help but think of the possibility that the stress caused by isolation and its consequences on strained interpersonal relationships could deeply affect the long-term future of their families, especially in those where there is a risk for domestic violence.

From Pedagogic Principles to Remote Online Learning

Because of the multifaceted nature of pandemic isolation, the educator is taken out of their comfort zone—mostly because of the policies of social distancing implemented and the suspension of certain freedoms. However, the pedagogic work has had to continue through a myriad of changes; thus, the educator's responsibility toward their students has only increased in the face of changing circumstances.

Teachers in this situation were instructed that they should use all available technological resources to continue with their teaching praxis, with all the didactical and methodological changes that this would imply. They did this based on their often limited experience with online education and off-site educational practices.

The younger educators from urban backgrounds exhibited scarce trouble adapting to this change, but the same could not be said for students' parents, who were often caught unprepared. Thus, the educators had to face a situation where the tools required to continue the learning process at a distance were not available for their students.

It should be noted that *millennial* and 'digital native' educators had the least trouble adapting their strategies, whereas senior educators were the ones who struggled most, given their limited proficiency with online tools. Senior educators had to rely on alternative communication options, such as cellphones, some social media platforms, and messaging through WhatsApp.

Communication with the parents occurred, more or less, every two or three days; sometimes once a week. Usually, on Sundays, the teacher would submit the planning for the following week, with an attachment of methodological directives and didactical tools for the children. In some cases, the children would ask their teachers to send them a video with the methodological instructions for the week, as it was unclear for them if the instructions relayed to them by their parents were not fully accurate.

Regularly, mothers sent the educators evidence of the students' homework, through photographs or video recordings. In some private institutions, the demands imposed upon the family unit were significant, often overwhelming, as children were required to perform considerably above their level. This is a common problem in private institutions at this level.

Another way of supporting the children through social isolation was through the addition of games, tales, riddles, wordplay, and "*carretillas* silábicas" (a type of syllabic game for children based on the Minjares method), all of which aimed at strengthening their reading and writing proficiency, while some counting exercises were also added to help them develop mathematical thought.

In some cases, instructional videos were created by the educators to provide step-by-step instruction for tasks. Preschool educators relied on the workbook provided by the Public Education Secretariat in Mexico. These workbooks have different pedagogical activities designed primarily for preschool students. However, it should be noted that this did not occur in all cases, such as in rural areas and marginalized zones, as these options are rarely available due to the remoteness of the students' location or chronic economic and cultural poverty.

Learning Within the Educator's Praxis

The surveyed educators emphasized that through this period of social isolation, they gained a new perspective of online degrees, courses, and seminars, and appreciated their availability. They learned that interaction with their colleagues and students is a vital source of learning, especially because children establish a learning experience through play, which is how they strengthen their psychomotricity and abilities of communication and corporal expression.

The educators also learned that lesson plans are susceptible of being adapted and even improved with additional didactical tools and tactics of pedagogic communication. It is generally believed that the classroom is the environment which instills in society a sense of certainty that children are learning.

The teachers surveyed also confessed that they missed the classroom environment, as well as their students. They acknowledged that the demands stemming from the radical change produced by the health crisis are important, and that all of us should face this trial with seriousness, proactivity, and optimism.

For childhood education professionals, nothing can make up for the lack of face-to-face interaction with their students in a classroom environment, as this context is a source of nourishment for educators who love what they do and deeply appreciate the displays of commitment from their students when it comes to their schoolwork, as well as the bond they develop with them.

From a strictly pedagogical standpoint, some of the educators surveyed pointed out that they learned to support their students at a distance, bridging the gap through technological and digital resources. They learned to put into practice alternative pedagogical strategies and developed a better disposition toward independent work, seeking other tools and materials and reinforcing their ability for tolerance and resilience against unexpected situations.

Unfortunately, it was also confirmed that parents often consider schools mere daycare centers (especially at a preschool level), rather than specialized educational environments. Thus, educators gained a better grasp of what it means to be a teacher; they learned to value their role and acknowledged that there are alternative methods of learning, teaching, and being educators.

Similarly, through the survey, one can understand that teaching and learning have no limit, as humans are capable of reinventing themselves and improve with each passing day. Conversely, it is also evident that the educator's profession is sometimes severely underrated by parents as a result of their own past experience.

The Experience of Isolation

Today it is widely acknowledged that some teachers in Latin America are functionally illiterate when it comes to the pedagogic application of technology, especially when compared to students. However, most children have learned pedagogical routines, procedures, and directives that are useful for periods of social isolation. Thus, there is a need to bridge this gap in order to understand how pedagogic accompaniment can be achieved.

During the pandemic, the teaching practice has been confined to teachers' and students' homes, enabled by digital communication tools. Thus, educators have relied on the assertive participation of students' parents, as they are their main allies in achieving their children's pedagogical goals.

Moreover, no matter how specific and structured the activities are when they are virtually distributed to students, there will always be a gap resulting from the absence of the teacher, whose task it is to coordinate students' work. Educators' role is crucial in directing discussions, contrasting opinions, and evaluating the educational process; in general, they are

tasked with accompanying the students and strengthening the pedagogical bond. However, the bond between teacher and student is hindered by the distance inherent to an online setting.

Today we can affirm the conviction that learning is an unending process, while knowledge can always be improved and continue to hold surprises even for seasoned educators. Our capacity to access the data stored in our memory is nearly unlimited, which allows us to build upon past experiences through cooperation and piece together the zeitgeist of historical events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the end, we are left with a wealth of resources that can allow us to learn and adapt.

What Did We, as Educators, Learn During the Pandemic?

First of all, we learned that professional development and online education acquired a new dimension during the pandemic. The global crisis has shed light on educational institutions and governments' considerable efforts to ensure continuity in the learning process, even in a situation that has left students unable to be present in the classroom. This contrast has also allowed us to acknowledge the privilege of being able to study a career in a classroom.

However, we have become aware of the fact that several free-of-charge videoconferencing platforms can host virtual meetings through which educators may provide students with accompaniment and establish a bond with them. We have observed that it is easier for younger students to adapt to new technologies, compared with their older counterparts. However, simultaneously, some educators (such as I) have managed to attain a degree of proficiency with these emerging tools during the isolation period.

The pedagogical recommendation that I give my students is that they should create virtual planning sessions with their colleagues, which could allow them to strengthen their teamwork and provide them with more elements for their pedagogical toolbox, as they are postgraduate students who are actively working as elementary school teachers.

Conclusion

When faced with a threat against their existence, the most important thing for the individual is to keep themselves and their loved ones alive. Thus, within the context of a pandemic, it is imperative to understand and follow the guidelines established by healthcare authorities, including those related to social distancing. While it is desirable that education remains an interactive and inquisitive process, it should be conducted within the margins of mandatory isolation. This is why virtual communication has acquired a crucial role in education throughout the health crisis.

It is imperative that, in spite of such health crises, new initiatives are put forward and that we lose the fear of thinking outside the box. Even though we should remain aware of the fragility of human life, it is also important to recognize that human knowledge is capable of devising new mechanisms of preservation and survival through the wonder of intelligence and creativity.

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