

Classroom-Based Education, no Longer the Gold Standard?

Andreea ILIESCU¹

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Abstract:

The paper brings forth the key concepts of 'flexibility' and 'immediacy', indicative of today's educational landscape. With digital technologies permeating societies now more than ever, the learning process comes under close scrutiny.

What implies, therefore, keeping pace with a 'fast changing world of work'? Among other things, we should mention the ability to grasp how relevant digital learning has become.

Online education marks a paradigm shift, being revealed as a true game-changer, hence the prospect of exploring the science and art of instruction from quite different angles with the sole purpose of setting a new pedagogical framework.

Keywords: *classroom-based learning; online education; synchronous vs. asynchronous learning; a new pedagogy*

1. Premises

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, digital revolution is greatly impacting education. With the vast majority of students being tech-savvy, instructors at large not only contemplate the most suitable purpose that technology can serve throughout the educational process, but they are also constantly designing new methods, intended to reinforce students' motivation and their sense of engagement.

What implies keeping pace with a 'fast changing world of work'? Among other things, there is, perhaps, the ability to grasp how relevant the 'online learning and work-related skill development' have become.

Educating students with the skills to manage their own learning throughout life, the well-known 'lifelong learning', the 'global competencies' required for work, and an enhanced connection between learning and employment are all coordinates widely perceived as some of today's primary education drivers.

Nowadays, the changing student demographics lie at the core of all strategies pursued by education institutions. If we were to profile

¹ Senior Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova, Department of Applied Modern Languages.



students today, we would certainly emphasise their higher expectations, a constant quest for flexibility, and more diverse age brackets than decades ago. Given the current specificity, education institutions need to align their strategies with the emerging student demands, thus also ensuring that their programmes guarantee skills development in information and technology literacy.

2. Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning, Two Sides of the Same Coin?

We believe that unravelling the nuts and bolts of remote teaching and learning has proved to be unexpectedly challenging. One of the dominant online learning methods has been synchronous video-conferencing, coupled with a consistent effort to replicate classroom-based dynamics. Classroom-based dynamics were considered the gold standard before the Covid-19 pandemic: 'Couey (2022) has set out some of the advantages or affordances of synchronous, in-person learning: a) a dedicated space and time where students and instructors can meet to discuss learning material develops a sense of companionship and can foster an environment conducive to learning; b) students are able to discuss complex material together in order to gain a better understanding in real-time, and instructors have a greater finger on the pulse to know what they need to focus on; c) students can interrupt the lecture to ask questions which can lead to a narrow, targeted discussion; d) students can break out into smaller groups to collaborate with each other. Some of the best learning opportunities come from these spontaneous questions and discussions. e) Teachers can feel the pulse of the room and have a much greater idea about which parts of the lesson students understand and which they might need to spend more time reviewing.'

Nonetheless all experience acquired during in-person classes, online education marks a paradigm shift, being revealed as a true game-changer, hence the prospect of exploring the science and art of instruction from quite different angles with the sole purpose of setting a new pedagogical framework: „Synchronous technologies require all those participating in the communication to participate together, at the same time, but not necessarily in the same place. Thus live events are one example of synchronous media, but unlike live events, technology enables synchronous learning without everyone having to be in the same *place*, although everyone does have to participate in the event at the same *time*.

² <https://www.tonybates.ca/2022/04/07/discussing-the-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-synchronous-or-asynchronous-learning/>: 'Discussing the Strengths and Weaknesses of Synchronous or Asynchronous Learning' by Tony Bates, retrieved July 10th, 2022.



A video-conference or a webinar are examples of synchronous technologies which may be broadcast 'live', but not with everyone in the same place."³

Prior to the pandemic, online learning was mainly perceived as an asynchronous format, shaped by the principles of flexibility and enhanced access to recorded learning resources: 'Asynchronous technologies have been used in online learning for at least 30 years (and in the case of older media such as books for much longer). Because asynchronous online learning has had to justify itself in comparison with in-person learning, we have more practice- and research-based evidence of the affordances of asynchronous online learning, as well as well-defined quality standards. Overall there are major educational benefits associated with *asynchronous or recorded* media, because the ability to access information or communicate at any time offers the learner more control and flexibility. [...] This research underlines the importance of changing design as one moves from in-person to asynchronous technologies. Thus we can predict that, although there are benefits in recording live lectures through *lecture capture* in terms of flexibility and access, or having readings available at any time or place, the learning benefits would be even greater if the lecture or text was redesigned for asynchronous use, with built-in activities such as tests and feedback, and points for students to stop the lecture and do some research or extra reading, then returning to the teaching.'⁴

During the pandemic, though, there were some overlaps between synchronous video-conferencing and asynchronous learning, which prompted all participants in the educational process to start questioning the long-term validity of such an approach.

A further analysis of the strengths and weaknesses specific to the two teaching methods alongside Tony Bates' perspective on the topic in question enable us to highlight the following: a) there is an unquestionable need for reassessing the current education technologies in order to choose the most adequate ones; b) furthermore, in terms of designing a long-term reliable pedagogy for online teaching, we can't overlook that students might end overburdened with extra tasks that are added to synchronous learning, a pattern which, therefore, leads to their screen-time being regularly monitored, too.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*



3. Project-based Learning

As Youki Terada points out in *'Boosting Student Engagement through Project-based Learning'*⁵, thanks to this method students experience an increase in their 'motivation' and 'sense of understanding.' In other words, 'project-based learning (PBL)' is likely to offer the much needed answers to those educators concerned with a significant drop in students' attention span and academic achievement.

'Project-based Learning (PBL)' is also informative in terms of the „'need to know' attitude in students", this approach empowering them to feel 'motivated to deepen their understanding in order to solve a problem that is meaningful to them.' On balance, 'concepts are better understood when students see a need for their use because that need encourages them to apply what they're learning to relevant situations [...]'

Additionally, 'project-based learning' represents an intensively promoted method nowadays, a method that moves the focus from merely 'learning facts' to 'applying those facts in open-ended projects.' According to Youki Terada, PBL is underpinned by what is known as „the 5E model, which eschews a traditional 'scope and sequence' approach in which students progress along a fixed path of concepts and skills throughout the [...] year. Instead, instruction is organized around five phases: 1) engage-students' interest is piqued with novel ideas; 2) explore-hands-on activities deepen understanding; 3) explain- students describe ideas in their own words; 4) elaborate-ideas are applied to a broader context; 5) evaluate-students provide a rich picture of their understanding.”⁶

As it's largely acknowledged, project-based learning empowers students to not only learn facts, but to equally understand the role these facts play within the surrounding reality and the degree to which they are mirrored by it. In a nutshell, project-based learning shifts the focus from facts alone to practice-based evidence, thus enabling students to become more engaged with their studies.

4. How to Leverage the Emerging Technological Landscape?

The article *'Understanding the Building Blocks of Online Learning'*⁷ by Dr. Jane Brindley and Dr. Ross Paul comments upon Tony Bates' 'drivers

⁵ <https://www.edutopia.org/article/boosting-student-engagement-through-project-based-learning>: *'Boosting Student Engagement through Project-based Learning'* by Youki Terada, retrieved July 10th, 2022

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ <https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/how-teach-online-student-success/understanding-building-blocks-online-learning/understanding-building-blocks-online-learning>: *'Understanding the Building Blocks of Online Learning'* by Dr. Jane Brindley and Dr. Ross Paul, retrieved July 5th, 2022

of change in the way we teach and learn', being widely known his stance on 'technology for accessibility, for flexible response to diverse needs, for improved quality and cost control, and for institutional accountability.' By the same token, we learn that Tony Bates' framework, built for raising people's awareness about the need for a synergistic approach of technology and education, encompasses items like 'changing demographics' with an increasingly diverse learner pool; an incremental number of students mastering tech skills and 'who are demanding the same sort of flexibility and access from post-secondary education that they already enjoy in their daily business and social interactions'; 'recognition of society's needs for skilled knowledge-based workers and the associated focus on learning outcomes' that may translate into a reality in which, if students grow aware of the prevailing workforce characteristics, they will undoubtedly realize how relevant soft skills are nowadays to the complex process of employment; consequently, they will also take a greater interest in refining soft skills in high demand like: critical thinking, problem-solving, active listening, excellent communication, professionalism, common sense, teamwork spirit, decision-making, initiative, creativity, detail orientation, lifelong learning, and this list is not intended to be exhaustive.

Furthermore, according to Matthew Lynch, there is a real 'power of discussion' as far as online learning is concerned. Theorizing about this topic, the author underscores a three-fold perspective that highly benefits learners: 'a) discussions force learners to think critically about what they are learning; b) discussions allow students to construct new meaning; c) discussions guide student interaction.'⁸

5. Beyond the Pandemic: a New Pedagogy in the Spotlight

As digital technologies are permeating societies now more than ever, we should therefore identify the major contributors to the design of a new pedagogy. According to the study '*A New Pedagogy Is Emerging... and Online Learning Is a Key Contributing Factor*'⁹, there are seven drivers that are shaping online teaching and learning experience into a reliable pedagogy.

To begin with, 'blended' or 'hybrid learning' is projected as a more inclusive concept, thus bridging the gap between classroom-based

⁸ <https://www.thetechadvocate.org/leveraging-the-power-of-discussion-in-online-learning/>: '*Leveraging the Power of Discussion in Online Learning*' by Matthew Lynch, retrieved July 11th, 2022.

⁹ <https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/how-teach-online-student-success/new-pedagogy-emerging-and-online-learning-key-contributing-factor>: '*A New Pedagogy Is Emerging... and Online Learning Is a Key Contributing Factor*', retrieved July 3rd, 2022.



education and online learning: 'The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the field of education significantly. Online education has replaced in-person education in many countries and hybrid models of education seem to be the way forward for the future.'¹⁰

Secondly, there are the 'collaborative approaches to the construction of knowledge/building communities of inquiry and practice', with a professor ceasing to have all the answers and who, instead, will only 'maintain a critical role as guide, facilitator, and assessor of the learning.'

Thirdly, we should consider the 'use of multimedia and Open Educational Resources (OER). Digital media, YouTube videos such as TED talks [...] and, increasingly, open educational resources in the form of short lectures, animations, simulations, virtual labs, virtual worlds and many other formats' that already 'enable instructors and students to access and apply knowledge in a wide variety of ways.'

Furthermore, in an incrementally digital universe, the 'increased student control, choice, and independence' seem to gain more ground, becoming the new norm, while the educator's 'role moves more to that of facilitator with less control over where and how learning takes place, and often entering into negotiation over exactly what the content is.'

Next driver of a new pedagogy underscores the key concepts of *flexibility* and *immediacy*, concepts indicative of today's educational landscape. In a constant pursuit of fitting students' needs, education institutions are exploring more avenues, ready, therefore, to empower learners with accessible patterns like 'anywhere, anytime, any size learning'.¹¹

In the sixth place, our attention is caught by 'new forms of assessment', produced by digital learning permanent 'traces'.

To end this series, we include the 'self-directed and non-formal online learning.'

Based on the aforementioned characteristics, we can highlight three major trends: a) a shift in focus from classroom-based education towards a wider access to, and enhanced flexibility of education; b) instances of

¹⁰ <https://portulansinstitute.org/online-education-and-the-future-of-pedagogy/>: 'Online Education and the Future of Pedagogy', retrieved July 15th, 2022

¹¹ <https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/how-teach-online-student-success/new-pedagogy-emerging-and-online-learning-key-contributing-factor>: 'A New Pedagogy Is Emerging... and Online Learning Is a Key Contributing Factor', retrieved July 3rd, 2022: „Anywhere, Anytime, Any Size Learning. The development of 'any size' learning is seen in the creation of smaller modules, [...] that can be built or aggregated into certificates, diplomas or even full degrees, and which can also be used as stand-alone, free, open resources. These smaller modules fit the needs of many full-time students who are working part-time, as well as those needing greater flexibility or additional help with their learning. There is growing demand from students for short, 'just in time' learning modules that fit an immediate learning need.”

reconsidering the balance of power between ‘the instructor and the student’, thus championing ‘student autonomy’¹²; and c) reinforcing technology use as an integral part of both teaching and student assessment.

6. Knowledge-based Society, a More Conducive Environment for Actively Wrestling with Information

It’s commonly assumed that, in a knowledge-based society, educators at large have to equip students with all necessary tools ensuring both the access to and management of accurate information throughout all their working life: “In the evolving educational landscape, a key factor in the success of online education will be how agile educators and faculty are in adapting to the necessary changes. In order to succeed, two aspects come to mind. The first deals with the teacher’s ability to set and nurture a new context for the learner to succeed: the emergence of adapted or new pedagogy. The other concerns a relevant application of the emerging technical landscape: the ability to leverage technology in a way that it augments teaching capacity. In both cases, innovation in online education is required if the traditional format of teaching has to survive this digital disruption.”¹³

In the same vein, being in tune with the latest developments in their corresponding fields of research will empower prospective employees to meet the continuously shifting job market demands.

7. Conclusion

One of the meaningful takeaways from the pandemic relates to the fact that synchronous video-conferencing can’t simply replace classroom-based dynamics. There should be deepening considerations as to what are the most appropriate technologies to use in order to bolster students’ active participation, while also ensuring that their workload and that sense of exhaustion or isolation are coming under close scrutiny.

¹² *Ibid.*: ‘Clearly indicated in these developments, there are some common factors or trends: a) a move to opening up learning, making it more accessible and flexible. The classroom with information delivered through a lecture is no longer the unique centre of learning. b) An increased sharing of power between the instructor and the student. This is manifest as a changing instructional role, towards more support and negotiation over content and methods, and a focus on developing and supporting student autonomy. On the student side, this can mean an emphasis on students supporting each other through new social media, peer assessment, discussion groups, and even online study groups but with guidance, support and feedback from learning and content experts. c) an increased use of technology, not only to deliver teaching, but also to support and assist students and to provide new forms of student assessment.’

¹³ <https://portulansinstitute.org/online-education-and-the-future-of-pedagogy/>: ‘Online Education and the Future of Pedagogy’, retrieved July 15th, 2022.



The indefatigable quest for knowledge represents one of the primary drivers for change in education. On balance, we firmly believe that classroom-based learning is still the way forward as long as the emerging technologies are judiciously assessed and appropriately integrated within the overall process of education: 'Technological tools can support customization of content to the online environment, but it is erroneous to assume that technology itself is the panacea for effective online education.'¹⁴

We maintain, therefore, that by reconciling, to some extent, the benefits entailed by both synchronous and asynchronous learning, a new pedagogy for online education may be successfully engineered.

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