Education in Times of Crisis: The Intersection of COVID-19 and Online Learning

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At the end of 2019, the world learned about the first cases of the novel coronavirus—hitherto referred to as COVID-19, per the World Health Organization (Centers for Disease Control, 2020)—which started in Wuhan city, Hubei province, PRC. At the time of writing, COVID-19 has since spread throughout the world and intensified its grip on mainland China, with "more than half the country's 1.4 billion people … restricted from leaving their homes in some way" (Fifield, 2020, para. 4). As a result, schools in China have scrambled to change the way they operate. Approximately 200 million students (para. 1) are now required to attend their usual face-to-face classes in an online environment, while officials consider more long-term solutions to how classes are delivered and accessed. The ongoing COVID-19 outbreak is changing the way people evaluate the role of online education, especially in China.

COVID-19 and Contingency Plans

The COVID-19 outbreak highlights the need for contingency plans within educational institutions when students and teachers are forced away from traditional classrooms. Online classes have long been considered part of such contingency plans. Although COVID-19 is a recent and ongoing health crisis, previous health crises like SARS (2003) and H1N1 (2009-2010) also highlighted the need for backup plans. During H1N1, for example, more than 60% of higher education institutions in the United States had contingency plans that included swapping traditional classrooms for online ones; this included 20% of schools that did not already offer online classes (Allen & Seaman, 2009, p. 2).

The SARS outbreak took place in 2003, putting it 16 years behind the technology available during the current COVID-19 outbreak. Even in 2003, though, distance education was a viable option that allowed continued collaboration between teachers and students, even if that collaboration relied heavily upon older technology like "a PowerPoint presentation with

synchronized audio track to be supplied in VHS format; or a full video of lectures, consisting of lecturers 'performing' the actual lecture" (Feast & Bretag, 2005, p. 65).

Contingency plans during COVID-19 have evolved a bit since SARS and H1N1. First and foremost, consider that there are approximately 900 million internet users in China today than versus 60 million during SARS (McGregor, 2020, para.8) and that the Chinese government has added servers and satellite broadcasts to accommodate more learners who have shifted to online classrooms (Fifield, 2020, para. 12). This means the technology and support to transition from face-to-face to online classes exists, but there is no guarantee that the transition is easy.

Disruption and the Need to Adapt

Teachers and students who have been disrupted by COVID-19 must quickly adapt to online learning in order to stay on track. This includes plenty of educators and learners who are not necessarily accustomed to online learning, as well as parents who are not used to having children home studying all day. Hui (2020) explains that "[i]n ordinary times, people escape in the day into a city teaming with cafes, restaurants and expansive offices" (para. 4), but COVID-19 has forced people to stay indoors. Entire families have sheltered into apartments for extended periods of time, and people have had to carve out spaces for themselves while they work, study, and (attempt to) relax in spaces that were already cramped to begin with.

The burden that the move to online classes has placed on teachers, students, and parents should not be discounted. It is not as though every course available to students online is easy to replicate from a face-to-face classroom. According to Fifield (2020) "[o]ne middle school boy, sitting with his computer at his front door in Beijing, was asked what he was studying. He responded: physical education." (para. 3). Students who are used to the social aspect of school are finding it tough to adapt to being inside all day in front of a screen and coping with all of the

distractions that arise from a full house has gotten old quickly (Hui, 2020, para. 9-10). Parents are suffering from the disruption as well, including those who have been forced to conduct their own work from home. Not every household has a computer; not every family member is adept at using the technology required of online classes (para. 20-23).

Industries Thriving Under Pressure

Teachers and students with online classroom experience are likely better equipped to handle the inherent challenges of a contingency plan that involves online classes. Naturally, there are courses that existed before the outbreak that are successful *because* they are delivered online, like a "dinosaur ecosystems [course] offered by [Hong Kong University]", which "allows students to work with digitized 3D specimens from famous museums around the world—something that would be 'difficult or impossible to arrange for a campus course'" (para. 12). Indeed, there are some long-time proponents of online education who are trying to see the silver lining and argue that COVID-19 has forced China to start better understanding and appreciating the potential of online learning, especially because of the opportunities it affords students who are not used to having a voice to "speak up" (Lau & Ross, 2020, para. 15-16).

Existing online-only platforms have seen an uptick in interest during the COVID-19 outbreak. EdTech "unicorns"—startups with valuations surpassing $1 billion ("Looking Into China's Edtech Unicorns", 2018)—have not yet formally released their numbers since the start of the outbreak. That being said, "TAL [Education Group] has stepped up its advertising for the online school on China's Twitterlike Weibo platform and other Chinese social media" and shares have increased "more than 20% for the year so far" (Ye, 2020, para. 12-13). VIPKid, an online company that pairs Chinese students learning English with teachers from North America, has suggested that interest in the company has risen dramatically since COVID-19 started

(McGregor, 2020). Thinking down the line, on the other side of the COVID-19 outbreak, online-only platforms could be seen as a valuable resource in case of any future outbreaks. After all, they have already been designed for an online user experience and have thousands of teachers familiar with their operation and navigation, so readiness and accessibility would not be called into question.

With no end to COVID-19 in sight, and with no clear timeline for when life for Chinese teachers and students is slated to return to normal, the role of online education continues to be important to student success, and perceptions about online education may be forced to evolve. COVID-19, like SARS and H1N1 before, has much to teach education industry about how to adapt in times of crisis. With the right plan and resources in place—and by learning from companies that already operate successful online learning platforms—the people who may be disrupted the most by an outbreak may be in a better position to transition to an online learning environment.

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