REMOTE TEACHING IN THE COVID–19 PANDEMIC: AN AFFECTIVE–HUMANISTIC APPROACH

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Abstract:
The aim of the present paper is to discuss and describe the affective and humanistic dimensions and repercussions caused by the rapid and unexpected shift from the conventional, classroom mode of teaching to the remote, online and digital system that accompanied the eruption of the COVID–19 pandemic. The significant challenges facing distant education, especially on the humanistic level, during this hard, globalized crisis, seem to have been underestimated by educational authorities and policy makers in general. The researcher will first sketch out a general overview delineating the decisive role of the affective–humanistic approach within the educational framework in general. Second, he will discuss the remote learning/teaching mode and motivational–affective mechanisms within the COVID–19 pandemic. In this respect, special focus will be granted to such online learning and the value of equity in the age of the pandemic, as well as the decisive significance of the teacher’s counselling and affective role therein. A final section will be dedicated to practical proposals for teachers to lower down their students’ affective filter during the COVID–19 pandemic.

Keywords: affective; humanistic; remote learning; COVID–19 pandemic; motivation; equity.

Introduction:
2020 was a hard, terrible year and trying time for exclusively everybody and every country on the globe. It is a commonplace nowadays that the outburst and spread of COVID–19 pandemic, as an unprecedented global or globalized public health crisis, has exacerbated and disrupted almost every aspect of human activities, including, of course, education. The deep and negative effects and consequences on the educational system worldwide have been very detrimental and even, to some extent, devastating. The partial or total closure of educational institutions worldwide, and the quick and unexpected conversion from a conventional, familiar and easy-going classroom teaching mode to an online or, for the best, a blended or hybrid model, has totally disrupted the whole educational system on all sides.

Apart from the pedagogical quality of the online teaching materials as well as the specific adopted methodological approaches and technology tools, a major component of the process has to do with its affective, motivational and humanistic dimensions. In other words, the psychological and emotional well-being of the distant learner is as important as, if not more important than, the hard, online infrastructure and digital platform. In fact, one may wonder, in this respect, about the extent to which has such a digital education and its virtual context contributed either to a positive, motivational drive of the learner or, on the contrary, fostered and deepened his anxiety and stress, already affected by the physical and social isolation and lockdown. Whether adopting an in-person, remote or hybrid teaching-learning scenario or a combination of two or all of them, the intent is to seek practical solutions or strategies to integrate the individual learner both intellectually and emotionally. The need for a rigorous and
creative approach to teaching and learning process that responds to different learner’s needs, namely his affection, self-realization and psychological well-being, is an immediate emergency.

1. Affective – Humanistic Approach and the Educational Process

First, it should be noted that the humanistic and affective learning is not a new tendency in education, but it goes back to as far as the beginning of the twentieth century. The early humanists like Abraham Maslow (the father of humanism), Carl Rogers as well as James, F.T. Bugental, reacting against behaviorism’s focus on rewards and punishments, believed that the learners are inherently good and can give the best of the educational attainments, once their essential needs, including their feelings, emotional and affective desires are met. In other words, the learner should be taught and dealt with as a ‘whole person.’

Later on, the humanistic and motivational dimensions in education have developed to establish an affective-humanistic approach and educational framework that reacted against both the audiolingual and cognitive traditions and their exclusive lack or poverty in affective and emotional considerations. New teaching methods that appeared, starting from the mid-1970s, like Community Language Learning (e.g., Curran 1976), came to stress, beyond the intellectual level, the emphasis on the individual learner, his instinctive reaction and the internal conflict he faces to internalize knowledge, as well as both student-student and teacher-student relationships. It is a new student-centered learning that considers education first and foremost as a process of learner’ self-actualization and self-realization.

The teacher’ soft authority and typically counselling and facilitating role fosters that humanistic goal via creating a warm and sympathetic atmosphere. The point is that a successful and efficient educational attainment is triggered by a self-motivation, positive affective context, and community-conditioned framework. Added to a soft counselling and partnership teaching, stressing the learner’s autonomy and self-evaluation, the final outcome is a ‘whole person,’ responsible learner who takes exclusive control over his education. Therefore, one could not help from wondering about the real humanistic and affective visions carried on by the newly adopted remote teaching-learning system.

The post COVID – 19’s educational world will never be similar to the pre–pandemic one. The new alarming situation has unexpectedly come to challenge the whole educational body including teachers, learners, pedagogical policies, teaching methods…The must-to-do adaptation to online, remote and virtual modalities and requirements is the major key challenge.

2. Remote Learning and Motivational-Affective Mechanisms in COVID–19 pandemic

2.1. Remote Learning and the Learner’s Psychological Well–Being

Suffice to say that the priority of priorities for genuine policy makers and rulers worldwide is the health and well-being of citizens including learners and teachers. Yet, while the considerable emphasis of authorities is the physical and physiological state, distancing measures, lockdown and preventive actions against the pandemic, the individuals’ psychological health and well-balanced mental being are as important as the physical dimensions, if not more important. The situation is more alarming especially in the case of young learners who need primarily vital affective support and care during this crisis-conditioned era. A physical distancing imperatively requires a parallel emotional proximity. One cannot help but wonder whether the online pedagogies and remote teaching measures, taken up till now (mid 2021), have effectively influenced and positively motivated learners toward achieving their sought educational attainments and self-fulfillment or not.
The strict lockdown measures applied in many countries, along with a serious phobia fear of the pandemic have deepened and amplified learners’ feeling of stress, anxiety, instability and uncertainty. The resulting outcome might be assessed in different degrees of ups and downs in students’ educational development and attainment. Within this general phobia context, even the newly adopted educational modes and measures, as a response to COVID–19 repercussions, may turn out to be themselves a source of threat and psychological burden. The Lifelong Learning Platform of the European Civil Society for Education, for instance, in a skeptical approach, has noticed that “the very activities of teaching and learning have now become factors of stress: new evaluation methods and uncertainty, scarce equipment to properly follow education courses, lack of digital competences, etc. are all new stress-inducing factors.” (LLLP COVID–19 Statement, 2020). Consequently, the statement calls for “pedagogical provisions and education materials on keeping learners and teachers safe on the mental health side should be introduced in the emergency curricula.” (LLLP, ibid).

2.2. COVID–19 Pandemic’s Framework and Educational Humanistic Platform

The whole global or globalized pandemic’s crisis has clearly shown that the immediate need for an open, online humanistic platform that prioritizes the learner’s affective needs and aspirations, while developing and enhancing his intellect, is extremely eminent. Within the educational circle, it is nowadays taken for granted that motivation and affect, as the inner drives or desires, causing learners to respond either positively or negatively to the learning environment, highly influence them in the learning process. This phenomenon becomes more persisting and highly relevant in such crisis-affected conditions as the COVID–19 pandemic’s ones. Most learners, especially in their young age, are full with an initial reservoir of motivation for learning and aspiration for self-developing. In fact, “the more they feel themselves respected and cared for by the family, the teacher, the peers, and the school environment as a whole, the more productive and achieving they will be in their educational attainments.” (Araq, 2003:13). Yet, how do these mechanisms apply and hold true in the COVID–19 pandemic? Most parents, family members, and teachers have noticed, during this crisis, that children, especially, have expressed less excitement and motivation for learning, compared with the pre-pandemic era.

While the online learning, equipped with digital means and tools, may provide a kind of instrumental motivation or orientation to acquire knowledge, the learner’s integrative motives to familiarize and fully engage in the new ‘digital culture’ and context are not guaranteed. To be fully integrated within the imposed COVID–19’s educational reality, the learner needs to develop a high degree of positive attitudes toward it. The intent is a socio-psychological model that deals with such reality through the learner’s adoption of new modes of response and behavior toward the new digital context. The learner’s developed positive attitudes are centered around the new modes of learning, stemming from his preferred learning style(s), the teacher and the set of interpersonal and social qualities witnessed in him, and last, but not least, the learner’s attitudes toward himself and his self-image during the pandemic’s hard times.

The identification with of the emerging online community, especially during the pandemic, requires a kind of socialization process and inner interest that stand for the major factors assuring the learner’s long-term motivation vis-à-vis the new kind of course delivery. In other words, the learner needs to develop a kind of intrinsic motivation, arising not only from within himself, but also from the nature of the teaching process as a whole and his developed curiosity therein. Within this respect, one may talk about an acculturated member of
a new linguistic and digitally conditioned ‘cultural’ community. Yet, to achieve this new ‘anthropological’ era, a transitional phase from conventional, in-class teaching, with all its multifaceted aspects, toward a gradual remote, online, digital framework, with its deep and revolutionary sociocultural effects, is highly solicited.

For many, distant learning, with its digital infrastructure, is the best and most suitable alternative to face the pandemic’s health repercussions and effectively assure social distancing. Undoubtedly, on the educational level, efficient and diversified online tools, including digital learning systems, platforms and mobile applications…constitute an immediate necessity during the Coronavirus crisis. However, are these up-to-date, state-of-the-art technological means sufficient? In other words, do the learner’s needs revolve only around these virtual, ‘digital gadgets’? Is the immediate concern only in establishing online classes and furnishing them with digital tools and ICTs, or does the matter seek much deeper to touch the very essence of the learner himself? “Online learning is a human – not a technological – endeavor. We lose sight of that central reality at our own peril,” said Lora Taub, professor of Media Communication and dean for digital learning at Muhlenberg College of Philadelphia.

3. Online Learning and Equity in the Age of COVID–19

The above–mentioned affective voidance factors linked with the new mode of teaching come to compound, deepen and widen the other major obstacle characterized in the structural inequalities and the deprivation of social equity in online, remote education. Needless to mention that the fore–cited humanistic approach envisages and stresses such fundamental social values like equity, equal opportunities, solidarity, care and share, as necessary prerequisites for a just and equitable education system and long–term sustainable development. Does the whole students community benefit from the advantages of distant learning and have equitable and fair access to online, digital tools and platforms in a just and uniform manner? Are remote resources available to every learner, regardless of space–temporal and social constraints?

3.1. The COVID–19 Pandemic and Digital Deprivation

Nowadays, it has become commonplace that the potential future benefits embedded within the remote learning–teaching system should be a collectively shared asset among the whole students community. For Brotherhood, T. et al. (2020), it is essentially a question of ‘common good’ that is both collectively produced and shared. The outcome for them is a humanistic vision of higher education to support vulnerable students and achieve a kind of global citizenship education. The COVID–19 pandemic outbreak comes to foster social inequality and the denial of equal learning opportunities worldwide, especially on the level of online educational access whereby weak, if not no, Internet connection and computerized tools are available. Therefore, the pandemic has contributed to create new waves of deprived and marginalized learners worldwide; not the kind of conventional deprivation to attend schools or continue schooling, but a brand-new ‘digital deprivation’ in the age of information and communication technologies.

Furthermore, the rapid and unexpected shift from a familiar, easy-to-matter classroom courses delivery to an unfamiliar, online and digital mode of instruction has created an alarming situation where both students and a considerable number of teachers faced and are still facing many technical and online infrastructure hardships to adapt and get familiarized with the new mode of delivery. What makes the situation worse are the structural challenges associated with it like the lack of prior training in digital teaching techniques for most of the
teachers, the scarcity, the non-readiness and insufficiency of most of the school units and establishments to respond to such new and unprecedented situation. In fact, the digital–based pedagogy and its by-product educational system are brand-new modes in most of the countries, and constitute a typically emergency pedagogical challenge.

3.2. The Online Mode and the COVID–19 within the Moroccan Context

In Morocco, the government’s pre-pandemic incessant talks about digitalizing the public services and establishing an ‘electronic government’ has lasted for more than one decade, but the citizens have not witnessed a real, reliable, serious and operational efficiency in such process except in some rare office cases. The quick and unexpected outbreak of the pandemic has constituted a digital shock that has confused and disrupted the normal course of almost all the vital sectors, especially health, education and public services. Within the educational circle, for instance, most of the university students on different campuses have expressed real dissatisfaction and non-conviction vis-à-vis the measures taken by the authorities.

Officially, the pandemic has provided an inciting push for the Moroccan government toward a progressive digitalization of the whole educational framework and development of remote learning that will be, from now on, an integral part to complement the in-class mode, according to the recently, 2020’s adopted Framework Law. Yet, many Moroccan students, according to some university field and case studies, consider the recent remote, learning mode and its pedagogical interface system an ‘unwelcome intruder.’ Therefore, they are urging the government and policy makers to reconsider the ‘online teaching decision,’ since they see themselves, for the most part, unfamiliar with such mode, in addition to the loss of a major part of the programmed materials, compared with the conventional program, and the big challenge to get good scores in the exams. The situation, according to many of these students, is made worse given the exclusive absence of the needed logistics and tools to assure the sought teaching, in addition to the apparent weak teaching pedagogy among most of the teachers and trainers. Students also express their upset and annoyance because of the exclusive lack of communication and interaction between them and teachers, and also among themselves as peers. These student’s educational preoccupations are, in fact, in harmony with and consolidate most of the university teachers’ evaluation of the same situation. A collective work published by Ibn Tofail University (Kenitra, Morocco, 2020), comprehending twenty-nine research papers, tackles the topic of the COVID–19 pandemic and analyzes its direct and indirect consequences in different sectors (e.g., economy, health, philosophy, education…). It also provides conceptual frameworks as well as operational measures and solutions to deal with it not only in the immediate, but also on the long run. In connection with higher education, the work insists that in the digital era – and to interact with that emergency situation and its multifaceted effects both on the individual learner and the general social texture – the immediate need to reconstruct the whole educational system, along with its pedagogical and methodological efficiency in dealing with learners, is a must-to-do policy. The researchers also call for a profound mutation in the teachers’ attitudes toward the soft knowledge and digital education to effectively offer a quality-teaching that responds to students’ aspirations starting from the pandemic’s era and onwards.

4. The Counselling – Affective Role of Teachers within the Context of the Pandemic

Most of our teaching methods and strategies lack both affective and humanistic considerations and dimensions of the individual learner. The significance of these factors acquires a very specific status in such crisis-conditioned era like the present COVID–19 one.
The intent is a very particular counselling teaching-learning approach that transcends the immediate, superficial educational tasks toward understanding and focusing on the internal conflicts facing the learner to internalize any pedagogical content. Curran (1976)’s thesis that students often feel threatened by a new learning situation seems to be worth mentioning in this respect. The very quick and surprising transition from a classroom, familiar and conventional “shelter” toward an “imposed” virtual, remote framework has unquestionably created an internal shock within the learner’s psychological texture. Hence, a typically efficient teacher’s role is to help his students lower their affective filter by overcoming their internal conflicts and, to a great extent, eliminating the progressively established and inherent barriers created by the new COVID–19’s psychological impacts.

4.1. Teachers Face–to–Face with Professional and Psychological Stressors

It should be noted that not only the learners, but, to a certain extent, also the teachers have faced several stressors linked with the pandemic. These include health concerns, physical distancing, lockdowns and quarantines, travel restrictions, disrupted daily activities, doubt and uneasiness as to the outcome of the future ‘normal’ life in its different facets. In parallel with an immediate community’s health immunity, another equally important psychological immunity of both teachers and learners – characterized in responding positively, coping up effectively and handling down efficiently the new disrupted situation – is highly persisting.

The unexpected and rapid shift from an in-class teaching delivery mode to an online or blended course delivery seems to have accentuated and overdosed workloads and pressure on teachers, educationalists, and trainers. The point is that they, like their students and trainees, were neither prepared nor sufficiently equipped to face such a weird situation and new burden. Most of them find themselves overnight obliged to recondition and readapt to the new educational reality, via an emergency imposed self-training, or seeking technological know-how from colleagues or trained technicians and experts, in new digital technologies and tools. They were also obliged to readapt, manipulate and remodel their cursus with the new emergency pedagogy. Some of them were even obliged to establish totally brand-new cursus and study program. More than that, “balancing personal and professional roles is a challenge for many teachers, but online delivery of courses with work-at-home protocols and ubiquitous online work-related activity creates a lack of physical, temporal and/or psychological boundaries between school and home.” (MacIntyre, P. et al. 2020: 1).

4.2. The Learner Face–to–Face with the New Learning Framework Stressors

An efficient and successful online teaching framework should imperatively integrate the distant learner both intellectually and affectively. The latter must also benefit from an effective cooperative and peer-to-peer – despite the physical distancing – learning atmosphere where the maximum of psychological security and social identification is assured via diversified counselling and learning–teaching tasks and activities.

The individual learner, especially in the pandemic’s era, finds himself submerged by a block of internal and external stressors influencing and affecting most of his intentions and actions. MacIntyre et al. (2020) identify, based on Petrie (2020)’s study, four main such stressors. First, teachers’ incompetence to discuss pandemics and their repercussions with their students, and lack of digital training. Second, learners’ feeling of anxiety, loneliness and worry vis-à-vis such an unusual teaching mode. Third, parents’ non-ability to assist their kids digitally. Fourth, the typically challenging mission and hard process to keep a positive student – teacher – parent relationship and a collaborative learning and socialization within the online
framework.

The learner should primarily assess and feel a kind of particular empathy, kindness, compassion and understanding from the teacher. It is, therefore, the very counselling and facilitating role of the teacher. The immediate need for an affective, humanistic, and full engagement on the side of teachers as strong–leadership counsellors and collaborative educators and trainers is, nowadays, a must – to – do task and obligation. Otherwise, the educational process becomes a dehumanized, robot–like and soul–deprived mechanism and the individual learner becomes a simple, passive and motionless recipient. In fact, even “some of the most popular technology – mediated forms of education – such as TED talks, MOOCs and the numerous professional and amateur instructional videos on YouTube – are all staged in traditional ways, with someone talking and explaining so that others can watch, listen and learn.” (Biesta, 2019: 55)

The counselling and typical social role of teachers and educators as specialized caretakers is very crucial within these crisis circumstances. While the hard, digital skills of the trainer have been prioritized by the pedagogical policy makers all over the world during the COVID–19 pandemic, his soft skills, including his psychological and mental coaching and emotional intelligence seem to be very decisive in such an emergency situation. The lack of such soft powers may undermine the whole educational socialization process of the individual learner. Using their creativity and pedagogical know-how, teachers must also prioritize teaching- learning activities that assure high flexibility regarding course schedules, efficient interaction and participation, and multi-faceted modes of online connection. By so doing, the teachers foster the human and humanistic nature of the teaching process and create, more or less, ideal conditions for learners’ educational success. Chomsky makes it very clear and unequivocal when he stresses that “the truth of the matter is that about 99% of teaching is making students feel interested in the material. Then the other 1% has to do with your methods.” (Pedagogical Recommendations, 1996: 5)

5. Practical Proposals for Teachers to Lower their Students’ Affective Filter during the COVID – 19 Pandemic:
- Building, via the virtual platform or any other technology device, positive, constructive and cooperative relationships both on student-student and student-teacher levels. A highly efficient technique, within this respect, is to allow students, and give them sufficient allocated time and opportunities, to directly express feelings and impressions about their learning experience during the COVID–19 pandemic experience;
- Letting students feel and assess that the virtual class intimate atmosphere and the human conditions therein are given priority and prominence over both the pedagogical materials and the applied methods. No ‘ideal’ materials or methods, despite any updating tuning and even revolutionizing, could replace or fill in the gap of a community-conditioned class atmosphere;
- Creating a typically cheerful, enjoyable and encouraging virtual environment;
- Launching the virtual classes with a kind of casual ‘joking-like’ atmosphere and / or engaging in a short interactive conversation and dialogues about students’ daily routines and activities;
- Engaging in a counselling process via sharing and listening, either collectively or individually, to students’ experiences, impressions and even psychological challenges during the pandemic context;
- Establishing a genuine, functional teaching-learning atmosphere based on real collaborative
and cooperative teacher-students relationships by letting students actively participating in the elaboration of the cursus, and allowing them, step by step, to achieve their self-evaluation, self-actualization, and self-realization;
- Diversifying technology supports instead of adopting the exclusive, official, virtual platforms and classrooms as in MOOCs, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and having access to alternative, relatively accessible and available tools like e-mails, WhatsApp, discussion boards…
- Encouraging students, via a follow-up mentorship, to engage in a parallel, online kind of peer-to-peer learning and interaction from time to time;
- Establishing, especially in case of very young kids, a very cooperative and constructive tripart partnership between teachers, parents and learners; assisting and collaborating with parents and family members to respond not only to their children’s educational needs, but also their mental and psychological well-being.

Conclusion:
The decisive role of the affective–humanistic approach within the educational system in general is, nowadays taken for granted. The emergency situation linked with the COVID–19 pandemic, and the immediate need to adopt a non-conventional remote learning/teaching mode, has exhibited and strongly confirmed the centrality of motivational–affective mechanisms in dealing with the learner. Moreover, the value of equity within the age of the Pandemic, as well as the central role of the teacher’s counselling are very solicited therein. Remote teaching, far more than classroom one, must stress the role of the teacher as a real counsellor who seeks to involve the learners not only intellectually but also affectively and psychologically, especially during the hard and trying time of COVID–19 era. A successful teacher, more than in any other circumstances, is primarily required to enhance his students’ positive motivations and foster their psychological security.

References:
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