Introductionary article

Post-pandemic challenges for learning communities

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Abstract

This article presents the fundamental challenges facing education after the COVID-19 pandemic – technological, social, political and ecological. The author suggests that post-pandemic the most important problems will not be related to its effects, but to building civic and environmental awareness. Technological challenges, in the form of the necessity of expanding the repertoire of the technical means of education, and social challenges in the form of the need to rebuild relationships, were important in the pandemic phase, and their strongest impact was delineated at the very beginning. After a return to the new normality (however it may be defined), challenges of this type will not disappear completely, but their strength will become weaker when compared to the problems humanity has faced practically from the beginning of the 21st century.

Key words: philosophy of education, importance of ecology, civic education, COVID-19

The SARS-COVID19 pandemic forced the necessity of suddenly changing our lifestyle overnight. It is too early for any in-depth diagnoses, but one fact is indisputable – the world was not prepared for anything like this and failed in coping with the challenge (Klimanska, Klymanska & Haletska, 2020). Battling the pandemic for more than a year is primarily the story of a desperate struggle for the survival of people and companies. There is much to indicate that we will be counting our losses for a very long time yet, and that poorer societies have not yet even finished the struggle for survival caused by the pandemic. In this way, COVID-19 has made an even more painful emphasis on the division of our world into rich and poor, or those who have access to vaccines and the rest.

Meanwhile, education has become a kind of great social experiment, carried out from necessity in natural conditions (Pyżalski, 2020). The effects of this undertaking can be initially assessed as varied, questionable, and contingent on many factors. Various countries and learning communities have also adopted different coping strategies, depending on their possibilities or other (non-pandemic) limitations. (Hašková, Šafranko, Pavlíková & Petrikovičová, 2020).

In the field of education, the pandemic has also highlighted a number of specific problems and phenomena that are worth taking a closer look at, if only to better deal with similar challenges in the future (Wojciszke & Rotkiewicz, 2018; Pietrzyk, 2019; Tkáčová, Pavlíková Tvrdoň & Jenisová 2021).

The technological challenge

After lock-down, the technological challenge appeared to be the biggest problem for education. However, it quickly turned out that technological deficiencies would not be a particular barrier.

Of course, a number of specific problems arose, but they did not generally represent an insurmountable barrier, at least for those societies that already used the Internet as a means of supporting education. It turned out that learning content can be quickly and easily transferred to online resources or presented synchronously, largely replacing real contact.

Therefore, the greatest obstacles to the effective use of the Internet in education during the pandemic should be primarily perceived in the human factor (Sunstein, 2009). The low digital skills of teachers became a cause of frequent truancy among the educators themselves (sic!). This was evident in higher education. I personally know of cases when, in the first phase of the pandemic, academic teachers sent material to be assimilated to their students and then enforced (tested or examined) the level of assimilation of the educational content. In extreme cases, they even sent a list of exam topics without conducting any classes or providing any base material. Such cases, however, were marginal and should be treated in terms of a pathology.

In turn, pupils and students pretended that their lack of preparation and reluctance to make contact were based on spurious technical problems, such as an inoperative camera, broken microphone, or an interruption of their Internet connection.

However, everybody quickly realized that a reluctance to learn is in most cases independent of the pandemic. Those who did not want to learn found a way to avoid the effort, and those who felt responsible and valued education found ways to cope with the biggest challenges. Just as it was before the pandemic. Scientific studies indicate that the key to success was (and still is) good teacher-student contact, which technology can always facilitate.

Nonetheless, the pandemic has become a real problem for vocational education, where apprenticeship and training under the supervision of an

experienced master is irreplaceable. This specificity of vocational education became the reason that practically at every stage it was necessary to do everything possible to keep the work in personal teacher-pupil / student contact.

The social challenge

Critics of distance learning most often emphasized that education without personal contact loses its most important feature — directness. In this respect, the pandemic has indeed become a huge problem. For many students and teachers, the lack of personal contact is not an obstacle in achieving the desired learning results. For many others, however, breaking down stereotypes and expectations as to the form of education has become a real challenge (Tkáčová, Al-Absiová, Al-Absi & Pavlíková, 2021).

Undoubtedly, to a great extent mediated education limits the possibilities of:
- presentation
- operating by personal example
- the teacher's theatrical games
- the emotional component in building attitudes
- group pressure.

All this means that the teacher must look for new ways of interacting and building commitment if he wants to be as effective as before.

With a little bit of good will, it is possible to make use of new tools and programs and arrange work in virtual teams (or rooms or groups) which, due to their novelty, will be able to stimulate interest in education content.

Unfortunately, by observing online discussions and the educational reality, one can get the impression that many teachers do not treat technological challenges as an opportunity for development, but as a burdensome situation which limits the educational process with regard to the reduced possibilities for student socialization (Kondrla, Tvrdoň & Tkáčová, 2020; Tvrdoň 2019).

These difficulties and limitations cannot be denied. However, this should not discourage educational work. In the first place, such a situation is a challenge which must be dealt with, after which the emerging opportunities must be used in the best way possible — that is, to resign from the defensive position and move to integrated, strategic, and long-term actions.

Technology also creates some opportunities for socialization, group interaction, and teamwork. We only need to first become proficient with the right tools and then move from the stage of decent craftsmanship to the level of sophisticated artistry. This requires additional commitment, which may be difficult to achieve if teachers treat the pandemic as transitional and are survival-oriented rather than development-oriented (Harari, 2018).

Political challenges

The real challenges for education and learning communities are not the COVID-19 pandemic but the stupidity pandemic, which presents a real and significant political (Appelbaum, 2020) and environmental challenge (Michniewicz, 2020). All other problems can be solved with the help of appropriate technology, while the process of appointing of the governing powers and contempt for the natural environment require a deep spiritual transformation and the formation of renewed appropriate attitudes.

Throughout the twentieth century, we were dealing with the conviction that man is a rational being, and therefore knowledge and science would be the basic driving forces of development. Events at the beginning of the 21st century forced us to examine these beliefs. It turned out that various types of populism and extremist movements which had hitherto been shunned, not only found numerous supporters, but also gained sufficient political representation to enable them to gain an advantage and come to power, leading us towards a new type of totalitarianism and tragedy (Reykowski, 2020; Kralik, 2020). In this regard, I define totalitarianism as a system of the power of one party, accompanied by a facade opposition whose presence is to create the illusion of democracy.

It is to be fervently hoped that there will not be a total usurpation of power and World War Three, but to make these hopes come true, we need to find a way to overcome a pandemic of overwhelming stupidity, which is the root cause of unsound political choices. I think this is the biggest failure of education so far. We have not managed to equip societies with such tools for thinking that would be able to immunize the average citizen against manipulation and propaganda, and the longer societies are beguiled by false promises and manipulation, the harder it will be to rescue them (Keyes, 2004).

We also need in-depth interdisciplinary analyses of the situation which has arisen. We do not know what caused deficiencies in key competences in adults — especially when it comes to critical thinking. We don't know why even basic education has failed — causing doubts about biology, evolution, democracy. Without establishing the causes of educational failure on a global scale, we will not be able to design meaningful changes, and those that we introduce will be at a high risk of failure. There is an urgent need to resume the deliberations of the Club of Rome, perhaps in a new formula, and civic education should be at the top of the system's priorities.

The ecological challenge

As far back as half a century ago the Club of Rome, mentioned above, pointed to ecological education as one of the priorities in designing education systems. Much has been done since then, but as humanity we are con-

stantly fighting for the survival of the species, meaning that not sufficient has been done. Although some kind of ecological awareness has been laid down in developed countries, it (similarly to the case of civic education) is still not enough for humanity to survive. It is worth noting that half a century ago we did not yet know that we were fighting for the survival of the planet and the human species. This awareness did not appear until the 21st century, and scientific reports are still contested in many circles.

Human stupidity is not dangerous when kept in check by rational authority. The real problem only arises when there is a marriage between irresponsible power and stupidity. This is the situation we have in Western civilization, often in states with a seemingly stable democracy. Examples of the United States during Trump's administration, the United Kingdom during Brexit, or Poland under the rule of Kaczyński and Hungary under the rule of Orban's party, show how easy it is to cross the boundaries of rationality and fall into the madness of populism which appeals to emotions and stereotypes. The methods of dealing with deeply entrenched complexes then become resentment and "retrotopia" (Bauman, 2017), which have nothing to do with science or the truth.

It would seem that the confinement and isolation of people in their homes could increase their longing for social contact and an appreciation of nature. We do not know, however, how deep this belief in the value of "lost paradises" is, and whether this longing may turn into a permanent trend or more fixed attitudes.

Possible scenarios for change

The clash between education systems and the pandemic can be divided into two phases. The first phase was imposed responses. Societies were surprised and their reactions were focused on survival, not on maintaining the level of development. Educators did not always know how to cope in the new situation, their actions were often chaotic, inconsistent, and ad hoc — especially in those cases when they had to deal with their own digital illiteracy and were unable to change the way of education immediately, because they did not familiar with the appropriate tools.

The second phase (during the second half of the year, more specifically Autumn 2020 to Spring 2021) was more well-judged, and can even be described as strategic. The experience of the pandemic from the first half of 2020 had already shown what was facing us, and the summer holidays made it possible to plan long-term actions, taking into account the possibility of being attacked by subsequent waves of the pandemic. In practice, formal education took the form of remote learning, informal education focused more on resources and online communication, and non-formal education (provided by private companies and NGOs) tried to survive partly by moving to the Internet and partly by limiting its activities.

Looking at it logically, it can be expected that the experience of the pandemic will change our attitude towards using online tools because basically, in order to survive, every teacher has had to strengthen their digital skills. It should also result in an increase in the percentage of people showing a positive attitude towards ICT. It is worth noting, however, that ordinary citizens have a great influence on the organization and content of education in decentralized systems, while in centralized systems almost everything depends on the education authorities, who project systemic changes over a fairly long time perspective and not necessarily in accordance with the sympathies of the majority. In the aforementioned quasi-authoritarian regimes or political chaos, one might rather expect a certain conservatism, manifested in a quick return to pre-pandemic solutions. In other words, your workshop will enrich societies in which there is already a belief in the value of online education, while rather technologically conservative societies will remain behind.

A general desire to return to the world as we knew it before the pandemic is also evident in the area of forming social contacts. The loosening of pandemic restrictions has often resulted in total social relaxation.

It could be expected that the same will be true of our relationship to nature. Natural resources appear to be especially valuable when we feel their lack, sitting locked up in our houses in the concrete jungle. However, when we return to the reality of relatively normal social contacts, we will also return to the earlier patterns of behaviour and a disrespectful attitude towards nature (Králik & Mahrik, 2019).

Of course, a lot depends on our representatives. It will be different in the case of pro-civic and pro-ecological states such as Finland or Switzerland, and different in the case of quasi totalitarian regimes with anti-science attitudes. In other words, it should be expected that the pandemic itself will not change the consciousness of the people in power or the citizens themselves. This process takes time and ... appropriate education.

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