

Re-imagining tomorrow: our turn, our time, our future - A teacher's perspective

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Introduction

Towards the end of 2019 and at the beginning of 2020, people all over the world were forced to adapt to and embrace the 'new normal'—the term coined to describe the regulations introduced due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Yanow & Good 2020). The pandemic enforced a drastic worldwide transformation characterised by an increased dependency on technology (Yanow and Good 2020).

On 23 March 2020 a nationwide lockdown was announced to curb the spread of the virus in South Africa (Ward, 2020). Among other things, this led to schools being closed for more than two months and only reopening for a few grades on 1 July 2020 (School calendar: South African Government 2021). This meant that schools and teachers had to devise a plan to provide education from a distance by relying on the technology to reach their learners (Chick et al. 2020).

This paper discusses the increased use of technology by teachers in South Africa in the past year, both at schools and outside the classroom, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Du Preez and Le Grange 2020). The discussion will consist of three parts: 'Our turn', which deals with the teachers' part in transforming education, and how using technology might facilitate this change; 'Our time', which focuses on how the use of technology in education has now become necessary; and lastly 'Our future', which discusses the possible impact of the increased use of technology on the future of education.

Our turn

As an educator during the pandemic, I struggled in the past year to devise innovative ways of continuing with the curriculum while staying safe. I teach at a public school and therefore had to take into consideration that some learners would not have access to the

internet or appropriate devices that could support virtual classes. This was a problem faced by many teachers in South Africa in 2020, as highlighted by Mhlanga and Moloi (2020), who discuss the limited access to information communication technology (ICT) in education in South Africa due to the associated costs. However, the pandemic presented an opportunity to increase access to these technologies, as well as to information and content for learners and students through the use of other forms of technology (Mhlanga and Moloi 2020).

Schools and teachers had to suggest ways to remain on track with regard to the curriculum, bearing in mind the resources available to their learners (Onyema et al. 2020). Since not all households in South Africa have access to laptops and tablets, which would facilitate virtual / live classes (Du Preez and Le Grange 2020), teachers considered other possibilities, such as using social media platforms for teaching (De Jager, Rwodzi, and Mpfu 2020). Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter were used to teach, with learners replying to tweets, Facebook posts and WhatsApp group chats created by their schools and teachers in order to engage with the content (De Jager et al. 2020). The use of these platforms require parent engagement and involvement, which is highly beneficial to the learners as parental support is crucial (Mahaye 2020).

Our time

While teaching during the pandemic, I realised that teachers drive innovation in education. Suddenly, conventional and traditional contact classes and assessments were things of the past and new ways to teach and assess were required.

Van der Spoel, Noroozi, Schuurink and Van Ginkel (2020) discuss teachers' perceptions of teaching online during the pandemic and their experiences of transforming their contact lessons to online lessons in a short time. In the South African context, lesson delivery was not the only concern. Completing the curriculum was a fundamental issue and schools, teachers and curriculum developers made suggestions about essential knowledge to be included and subjects that should be continued online (Ramathan 2020). These suggestions brought to light some flaws and redundancies in curricula and identified the skills and knowledge that learners really need.

Even when COVID-19 regulations allow the reopening of schools, only some schools will be able to comply with stipulations regarding social distancing by arranging for learners to attend contact lessons in shifts (Ramathan 2020) to make classes smaller and more manageable. Furthermore, the curricula for many subjects

have been trimmed to retain only the topics and skills deemed necessary by the education community at large (Dube 2020). This highlighted the need for the curriculum to focus on knowledge that is necessary, relevant and responsive to the issues and challenges facing the country (Dube 2020) and do away with unnecessary content.

Our future

Now that the world has adapted to the 'new normal', one cannot help but wonder what will happen when the pandemic is over. Although many people may yearn to go back to how things were, we should consider the possibility that the pandemic was the push we needed to accelerate the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Many necessary changes took place in education: the introduction of virtual classrooms, increased access to ICTs for poorly equipped schools, the trimming of the curriculum and smaller classes (Dube 2020). Social media platforms are no longer used for entertainment only, but have become valuable teaching and learning tools (De Jager et al. 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to adapt to new circumstances by acquiring the skills needed to thrive in the current 4IR (Mhlanga and Moloji 2020) and we should continue to move forward, rather than take a step backwards to the 'old normal'.

Conclusion

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of resilience and how people can find innovative ways to solve problems. It also highlighted many weaknesses in the education sector, such as overcrowded classrooms and unnecessary content in the curriculum. The lesson to be learned from the current situation is to be open to change and embrace it.

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