Learning Possibilities

White paper

Digital Education and the New Normal in Schools

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The enforced school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 have thrown into sharp focus schools' digital capacity and their readiness to implement effective distance and online learning. The hasty, and often improvised, arrangements that schools have had to make to try and maintain learning continuity have underlined the need for careful planning based on a deep understanding of digital capacity at both a school and system level. In some respects, technology availability has enabled a degree of learning continuity during the closures; but the experience has been highly variable. [1]Some schools, in the early days of the crisis, rose to the challenge to great effect and were able speedily to switch the teaching and learning into an online experience. These schools, though, were in a significant minority and for most learners, for many reasons, the pandemic has been a somewhat dismal educational experience with significant consequential learning losses[2].

Schools have had to revisit some of their often-cherished beliefs aimed at, for example, limiting, and sometimes banning, the use of personal mobile devices in the classroom. Equally, at a system level, governments and ministries need to work hard with a wide range of partners, including telecom, internet and eLearning companies, to try and bridge the digital divide that exists at the level of the national infrastructure and its capacity to support distributed learning on a massive scale[3].

Beyond question, those school systems that have served their learning communities to the highest level are those with a coherent digital education strategy. The schools with the best strategies have been able to ensure learning continuity based on an accessible and secure learning platform. In the virtual learning environment created on such a platform, teachers and students are able successfully to interact online in a familiar setting, confident in the knowledge that their safety and privacy are not being compromised. Learning Possibilities has long experience of providing a secure cloud-based learning platform based on world-class Microsoft technology. Through its integration with the universally available Office 365 suite[4], the LP+ learning platform does not only meet the security requirements to the highest international standards but it allows users to produce original and creative work using industry-standard software.

Digital technologies have the potential to transform the way we live. Hardly any aspect of modern life remains untouched by technology. Yet, despite several decades of investment by national governments in educational technology and the powerful advocacy of several early enthusiasts the regular and routine use of technology for teaching and learning in schools is far from universal. There remain several issues that constrain the wide incorporation of learning technology into the everyday practices in schools. Indeed, in the teaching profession, there remains a significant proportion of teachers who, before the current school closure crisis did not routinely use technology for learning[5].

[1] ETF - COPING WITH COVID-19 - Distance Digital Learning during COVID19 in ETF partner countries
https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-06/mapping_covid_ddl_050620_1.pdf
[2] Azevedo et al., 2020
[3] https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse
[4] MS Office 365 is available free of charge to all users in the public education sector
[5] Akar,2019

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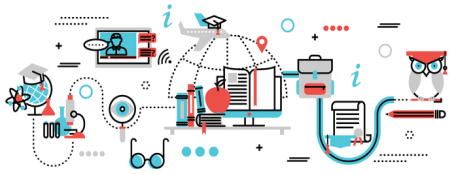

EDUCATION

"… this crisis has stimulated innovation within the education sector. We have seen innovative approaches in support of education and training continuity: from radio and television to take-home packages. Distance learning solutions were developed thanks to quick responses by governments and partners all over the world supporting education continuity[6]…."

In recognition of this reality, Learning Possibilities offers a comprehensive development package as part of our technology implementation strategy. The approach is based on our long experience of working with education clients in many different parts of the world. We understand that in order to bring about real change there needs to be a transformation in professional practice, skills and competencies in schools.

When we embark on the implementation of digital development programmes in schools, and school systems, we begin with a detailed situational analysis using LP OASIS, our "online assessment system in schools". This gap-analysis enables all stakeholders to be interrogated in order to from the basis of creating learning solutions on a case by case basis, both at school level, and where necessary system-wide. The skilled team of education professionals, who accompany the learning technologists, undertake a needs analysis of all aspects related to technology-enhanced learning. The six areas of analysis include: an inventory of the infrastructure and equipment; a review of current practices of teaching and learning with and through technology; an assessment of student digital competence; an evaluation of curriculum and assessment practices, including a review of alternative and authentic assessment; an examination of the leadership and policymaking practices; and the creation of an inventory of human resource development.

At many levels schooling has been criticized over the past hundred years as being out of touch and detached from the reality of the lives of most learners and the needs of employers. This criticism has grown even louder in recent years7

It is evident that schools have not been able to prepare students adequately for today's world, let along alone to prepare them for tomorrow. However, even the reforms that have been promoted over the years have hardly touched the "grammar of schooling" or the core business of schools. The call for changing schools has never stopped, neither have the efforts to bring about changes to schools. But the present opportunity to completely re-imagine education is unprecedented. To avoid repeating the grammar of schooling, a process of reimagination should now be happening so as to produce the best education opportunities for all children, instead of simply improving schools as institutions.

At many levels schooling has been criticised over the past hundred years as being out of touch and detached from the reality of the lives of most learners and the needs of employers. This criticism has grown even louder over the last decade[6]. It is evident that schools are not preparing students adequately for today's world, let along alone to thrive in the competitive globalised economy of tomorrow. However, even the reforms that have been promoted over the past century have hardly touched the "grammar of schooling"[7] or the core business of schools. The call for changing schools has never stopped, neither have the efforts to bring about changes to schools. But the present opportunity to completely re-imagine education is unprecedented. To avoid repeating the traditional grammar of schooling, a process of reimagination should now be happening so as to produce the best education opportunities for all children, instead of simply improving schools as institutions.

Learning Possibilities is at the forefront of this exciting journey of reimagination. Through maximising the use of learning technology, and applying coherent and student-centred principles of learning design, we co-construct, with our school partners, a digital curriculum to mirror and further expand their existing curriculum models. At the same time we support alternative assessment strategies that include systems to evaluate authentic learner evidence. Digitisation enables the learning experience, increasingly, to become more personalised and highly relevant to each individual learner. Moreover, the quality, relevance and suitability of assessment systems are enhanced as they are built upon a wider evidence base of student achievement.

[6] UNESCO, Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond. August 2020
[7] Barber, Donnelly, and Rizvi 2012; Wagner 2008; Wagner and Dintersmith 2016)

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The Learning Possibilities implementation team designs school solutions to reflect current trends and imperatives driving learning design[8]

- Instruction is becoming more personalized: learner-centred, non-linear and self- directed
- The distinction between face-to-face and distance education is disappearing through the imaginative use of education technology
- Lifelong learning is becoming a competitive necessity, resulting in a need for interoperable, networked learning
- Emphasis is shifting from course completion to competency attainment

To reflect these imperatives we work with schools to ensure that the following five critical considerations are in place to support teachers and to facilitate their personalisation and differentiation practice[9]:

1) Helping teachers to analyse their student characteristics and needs from an early stage
2) Giving teachers the tools to be able to plan a prescriptive instructional design based on the evaluation of learners, including their goals, resources, and strategies
3) Embedding assessment practice within a Learning Management System that assists teachers in handling and tracking of student data
4) Facilitating systematic and regular evaluation and review of curriculum content and assessment systems with a revision process to ensure that they are current and relevant to the needs of awarding bodies, employers and student interests as well providing for an evaluation of achievements and in order to provide constant feedback
5) Creating a platform where teachers can collaborate and share with one another and enabling peer coaching to encourage teachers to improve their inclusive practices.

The crisis in education brought about by COVID-19 should be seen as an opportunity for reimagining education. Schools are institutions for education, but they were built at a time when human understanding of learning and learners, knowledge and skills, as well as teaching and teachers was different from today. Even in the 20th Century, access to experts and expertise was drastically different from today, not to mention society and the economy. Radical change is therefore necessary now, both to make schools and schooling relevant to the needs of society and to be more closely aligned to students' lived reality.

System change in education requires careful consideration of the status, the personal motivations and the incentivisation of all the key players at every level. As Barber et al.[10] have indicated, in order to succeed, systemic change needs the strong commitment of stakeholders at all levels from policymakers and ministry officials down to teachers, parents and students. Through aligning system change to the best available technological solutions schools and school systems have an opportunity to involve all stakeholders through yoking their operations alongside the technological realities of today's world.

Learning Opportunities is the perfect trusted partner to accompany education colleagues as they embark upon system change – the LP+ team has the knowledge, skills, experience and strong professional commitment to support schools on their change journey at every step of the way.

[8] Howell, Williams and Lindsay, 2003
[9] Cha and Ahn (2014)
[10] Barber, M., Chijioke, C. and Mourshed, M. (2010)

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