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Fear of the Unknown: A Major Barrier in the New Educational Setting During the Novel Coronavirus Outbreak

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Abstract: Recently the way life is lived has undergone major changes. A pandemic outbreak, caused by a new virus impacted the world in numerous ways, affecting the health system, the economy, the industry, the everyday life and last, but not least, the educational system. The outbreak determined extreme measures such as school closure in the effort to contain the virus. The number of individuals of all ages not attending schools or universities because of the outbreak is rising. The vast majority of courses moved on-line and the e-learning represents the main educational setting used nowadays. If the main disadvantages of the e-learning, mainly related to the technological features, can be overcome with the help of skills training sessions, the communication barrier caused by the fears related to this outbreak may need a different approach. In this sense, the socio-constructivist theories of education, including the theories of contextualized learning all of which emphasize the socio-cultural dimension of learning, and the importance of social interactions in the process of knowledge building may represent a suitable approach.

Keywords: *e-learning; pandemic outbreak; educational barrier; fear of the unknown; social constructivism.*

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1. Introduction

Recently, the way we started living our lives has dramatically changed due to a viral disease that has brought life as we knew it to a halt. The pandemic outbreak is caused by a novel coronavirus recently renamed as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus two or SARS-CoV-2. The infection with the virus causes a wide spectrum of symptoms such as dry cough, fever and in less fortunate situations, severe cases of pneumonia. It is generally believed that the ones with a higher risk of death are the elder patients and the ones with underlying comorbidities. A few months later, after the first documented cases of infection, the World Health Organization (WHO) characterized the situation as a pandemic, due to the steep increase of the number of cases around the world, affecting two hundred ten countries and territories around the world and two international conveyances. As the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus it led to the death of over thirty thousand people so far.

While the scientists are still researching many aspects of the virus and do not have all the information yet, the abrupt geographical expansion and the sudden increase in the numbers of cases have quickly overwhelmed public health systems, public and private sectors all over the world (Wu & McGoogan, 2020). At the beginning of the outbreak there have been some questions about whether the restrictive measures employed, which to some extent have resulted in an infringement of citizens civil liberties, represent both reasonable and proportional responses to the outbreak. However, when such measures are approached, not only individual rights must be considered, but also the rights of those not infected but at risk of infection. The effectiveness of these approaches in terms of reduced infection and death rates, and whether the potential benefits outweigh the costs remains to be seen (Du, Wang, Cauchemez, Xu, Wang, Cowling & Meyers, 2020, p.1). Moreover, the present health and societal crisis highlights the interconnectedness of the global society and it is important to continue the improvement of international relations, cooperation, and communication about this major outbreak, resulting in a better preparedness of response to present and future public health threats (Wu & McGoogan, 2020, p. E1).

Even though the public health domain was the main system affected by the outbreak, other sectors, among which the field of education, have been impacted too. In result, the pandemic outbreak caused by the novel coronavirus led to school closures. The number of individuals of all ages not attending schools or universities because of the novel coronavirus, according to UNESCO, is rising. Governments all over the world have closed schools

and universities in their effort to prevent the spread of the virus. More than 160 countries have implemented educational institutions closures, which has impacted over 87% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020). Having to face this new challenge teaching practices had to rapidly adapt. For doing so, in the most cases, teaching has been transferred in a different study setting, with a special emphasis on web-based educational activities. Along with the change in the scenery the role of teachers in an e-learning environment also changes from a "one-man show" to a "guide on the side" (Guri-Rosenblit & Gros, 2011, p.6).

The use of information and communication technologies (ICT), especially web-based technologies, the Internet and e-learning, in general, have to situate students in the center of the teaching and learning process, mainly by constructing programs which will enable them to develop and enhance their creativity, self-determination, and self-discipline (Cantoni, Cellario & Porta, 2004, p.336). E-learning and learning based on information and communication technologies differ from the traditional classroom approaches in various ways. Therefore, conversing a traditional course to e-learning or web-based educational activity, requires careful organizing, monitoring and control. The benefits of e-learning are well-known, but some of them worth mentioning once more: relatively low costs, it is self-paced, independent of time or place, can lead to increased retention due to the visual and audio messages and can easily accommodate large groups of students. The level of retention may be improved by varying the types of content, by encouraging interaction and by providing immediate feedback. E-learning opens up channels of communication and expertise, defying borders and geographical areas. On the other side of the argument, the e-learning presents itself also with some disadvantages which derive mainly from the challenges of using and accessing technology in general and the supplementary cost of updating to the newest technology. Another potential drawback is that by limiting e-learning to simply presenting information calls for high levels of individual self-directedness, which may lack in some.

2. Major barriers in the web-based educational activities during the outbreak

Next to the above mentioned disadvantages of e-learning and ICT based education (Cantoni, Cellario & Porta, 2004, p.336), the present social context brings to the front a somehow expected, but less considered barrier in the newly established educational setting: the fear of the unknown. Right before the decision to close the universities, students were expressing their

fears and concerns regarding the spread of the virus, their educational future and about the evolution of the current situation in general. Having noticed these aspects also during and before the actual web-based educational activities, recorded group discussions focused on shared meanings were organized. These discussions were a method of collecting data from groups of people who shared common experiences (Payne & Payne, 2004, p.103). The main objectives were for students to get the opportunity to express their feelings, which are formed through interaction with others, and also to improve their later focus on the educational content. These discussions emphasized further students' need to express their fears and concerns. The main feelings revealed were related to the fear of the unknown, especially in the educational context considering the students were enrolled in their final year of bachelor's studies. Moreover, their concern was further intensified because, as educational sciences undergraduates, their future career depends on a national teacher examination which for now is suspended. Concerns related to personal and family health aspects, and disappointment directed to those who ignore the governmental restrictive measures, were also revealed.

Therefore, one approach could help solve some of the limits that emerged in the e-learning environment, in the context of the outbreak. Specifically, the social constructivist approach to teaching could help overcome the fears related to the outbreak and control the effects of the lack of self-directedness in the context of learning.

The constructivist approach to teaching engages learners in the active process of meaning construction and socially constructed knowledge related to authentic situations. Learning construction in this context is facilitated by the teacher. The constructivist approach to teaching emphasizes the importance of personal experience in the construction of meaning. Therefore, an idea, followed by an individual's experience, constitutes an integrated unit, namely the individual understanding of that idea (Tan & Hung, 2003, p.50).

Furthermore, the socio-constructivist theories of education are particularly interested in the socio-cultural dimension of learning, emphasizing the importance of the previous mentioned social interactions in the process of knowledge building. The notions of culture and context, also occupy an important place in shaping the socio-constructivist explanations of the educational act. Within the same current we may find the theories of contextualized learning. These theories believe that we cannot separate knowledge acquisition from the pedagogical and socio-cultural context. They claim that learning and knowledge presented outside any socio-cultural context is incomplete (Momanu, 2002, p.44). Constructivist approach to

teaching calls for teachers to be "practical intellectuals and generators of knowledge in practice" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.1015). Besides, socio-constructivist approach situates knowledge in an authentic socio-cultural context. Thus, the transmission and the approach of knowledge must take place in a process of communication and cooperation, in which the student plays an active role.

Accordingly, students' constant need to discuss the current social context determined to address this perspective, the immersion of the social context into the content to be taught or, otherwise put, the contextualization of learning. As expected, we faced the challenge of finding the space and educational context to bring in social issues, and at the same time to communicate all the content during this process. Various social aspects derived from the current context were inserted into the curriculum, and by allowing students to reflect upon it, some time and content had to be sacrificed. Extending the information and constructs from educational sciences to issues of social relevance may lead to improved retention since each concept can be approached from multiple perspectives. Using real social issues to link and deliver several educational concepts together, encourages students to have a global perspective and prevent them from perceiving education as a mere number of disparate concepts or subject areas distanced from real social issues (Chamany, Allen & Tanner, 2008, p.267).

Furthermore, to ensure a good quality of training the social constructivist approach was particularly useful in developing the e-learning environment, preventing the negative effects of simply presenting the information to learners. In addition to situating learning experiences in an authentic social context through the contextualization of learning, an open-ended learning environment was created.

This environment was organized around problem-based activities, resolved by learners through the use of different tools and resources. These resources acted as learning material when being actively used by students (Dalsgaard, 2006, p.3). In this sense, learners were able to use different, separate instruments depending on what tools serve their purposes. As recommended by Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy (1999, p. 70), learners were engaged in a knowledge-building process by creating a social constructivist learning environment. Therefore, each learning sequence was built around a problem related to the current social-context, followed by appropriate related cases used to complement personal experience. Relevant information, course materials and repositories were provided at all times, as well as visualization tools and information-gathering tools. The choice of

using a variety of tools, rather than one integrated system supports the requirements of open-ended activities. Thus, students had the freedom to make their own choices and identify other resources. The topmost tools used were the communication and social support tools which were used to promote dialogue and collaboration within the community of learners.

3. Conclusions

In the context of the latest social developments, where the world was forced to move on the Internet, the social constructivist approach to teaching may offer the best approach to ensure a high quality of training. Its versatility allows it to be useful in designing both, the informational content and also the e-learning environment. Assuming that before the outbreak was easier for teachers to employ the traditional instruction practices, choosing to exclude the social aspects from the educational act, considering the current crisis this strategy becomes damaging. The fears and concerns related to this novel situation must be included in the educational settings to promote freedom of speech and expression which may act also as social therapy. By doing so, creates a secure, collaborative environment which may increase the focus on the educational content. In this light, the theories of contextualized learning play a crucial role. These theories emphasize the importance of culture and context that cannot be separated from knowledge acquisition. Therefore, learning and knowledge must be presented in the prevailing socio-cultural context.

Moreover, the context of the pandemic outbreak and the uncertainty regarding the further developments of the crisis makes it difficult to provide qualitative training. To prevent these issues, the socio-constructivist approach offers some guidelines to create an open-ended learning environment. Accordingly, the e-learning context must encompass several interdependent components such a problem-based activities, related cases, relevant informational resources, visualization tools, and conversation tools.

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