Press RESET: Digitalising Education in Disruptive Times

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Abstract: The world is going through pandemic times, and about 85% of learners are affected by the fact that educational institutions have suspended their face to face classes. However, teachers are transitioning towards online education and the current paper looks at an example of good practice in finding a unitary teaching strategy during this crisis. Our aim is to review the practices and instruments used by colleagues from the West University of Timisoara, Romania, as well as to group together some solutions to potential issues arising from the sudden changes in pedagogical approach. We would like to propose seven steps “in resetting” education in disruptive times, which can be followed for a smooth and efficient digital transformation.

Keywords: *disrupting education; digital teaching; online courses.*

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1. Introduction

While the whole world is struggling with the COVID19 pandemic, hundreds of millions pupils and students are currently not going to schools in 165 countries. According to UNESCO, on March 25th, 2020, 87.1% of the total enrolled learners were affected. The “black swan” moment has taken global population aback (Taleb, 2018) and in just a few weeks those working in the educational field were forced to quickly transition towards online teaching. Simultaneously, a large number of valuable digital resources were made freely accessible by companies, publishers, libraries, and universities. While people are shutting the doors to their homes and countries are closing their borders, the virtual realm is opening up.

On March 11th, 2020, the West University of Timisoara (WUT, <http://www.uvt.ro/>) suspended its face-to-face classes. Nevertheless, WUT set on the mission to continue the educational process on optimal terms. The biggest challenge became ensuring that all students have access to digital resources and that all the teaching staff are involved in online education, which equals a reset of traditional classes. In this paper, we present the case of the Department of Psychology as an example of good practice in finding a unitary strategy in dealing with the effects of the pandemic on the university and its academic community. The paper, however, is not an inventory of didactical technology, but it aims to review the ways in which we can teach online, based on our experience since face to face activities have been suspended. Hence, our main goal is to survey the practices and instruments used by colleagues from our department, as well as to group together the solutions found to our educational issues during these unprecedented times.

2. WUT Digital Portrait

The West University of Timisoara has the necessary infrastructure to carry out online educational activities by using several e-learning platforms. WUT has an integrated system of platforms specialized for online learning, including Moodle (elearning.e-uvt.ro), Google Classroom, Microsoft Office 365 or Edmodo, as well as Google Meet or Skype for Business for video conferences (see it.uvt.ro). These tools allow sharing lecture and seminar materials and online bibliographical resources, and they enable electronic communication between students and teachers, both through private messaging, and on forums. The same instruments work for video conferences (synchronous communication), setting assignments for students, uploading tasks and educational projects, evaluating them and

giving feedback (all asynchronous means of communication between faculty and students). Moreover, EduRoam services are available in all WUT buildings (including the campus) and access to scientific literature is facilitated by the university's affiliation to the ANELIS program.

3. WUT Goes Fully Digital

Although the infrastructure is available and was already being used to a certain extent, the actual transfer of all didactical activities (lectures, seminars, laboratories, with all the theoretical, practical and applied tasks, presentations, etc.) exclusively to the online environment proved to be demanding, for teachers and students alike. Therefore, based on our experience so far as educators and course creators, we propose **seven steps** which can be followed for a smooth and efficient digital transformation of traditional classes.

1. Ask yourselves what is the appropriate technology and the right digital learning environment. Do students and teachers have access to different devices and platforms? How do they use them? Do all educational actors have training experience? What are the students' preferred learning environments for activities and assignments? More importantly, how can the teachers connect with the students and vice-versa? The university can help by surveying its academic members, and by establishing institutional readiness for online learning. This will allow universities to better understand the COVID-19 perspectives and status of their teachers, students, and institutions as a whole.

According to a recent study carried out at WUT (Grosseck, Malita & Bunoiu, 2020) millennials are an idealist generation, prone to experiment and search for new experiences, while those belonging to the Z generation (born between 1997-2012) are more pragmatic, but they are also the ones experimenting for the first time such distressing global events. It is important, then, to take into account the way in which they interact with digital tools and platforms and the most suitable means for them to achieve learning goals. To this end, most teachers from our department surveyed their students asking about their devices and digital skills. Regarding the teachers' access to technology, it was enabled by a recent measure taken by the WUT management through the "One laptop for each teacher" program.

2. Train yourselves to use the appropriate technology! Read about ways in which digital literacy empowers and, if you feel the need, get professional advice and help before starting to teach exclusively online. The transition to remote teaching requires a lot of hours to learn technology,

identify the best teaching tactics and above all “a great deal of patience” (Gewin, 2020). As Tony Bates (2020) remarked “teaching online is not rocket science but it does need a different approach from classroom teaching.” Also, it should be understood that remote teaching means moving all the activities to a virtual space only for a short period of time, which is not the same as designing a full course for the online environment (Gallagher, 2020).

We have to acknowledge that training websites for teachers are scarce, and so are online self-learning and counselling (technological and psychological) resources. Most of our colleagues were simply not ready to move all their activity online on such short notice, even if the infrastructure was available to them in our university. It is of utmost importance that all those involved learn how to use online tools correctly. Shortly after the announcement that schools and universities would close, WUT initiated a series of training webinars and organized a virtual library of digital resources (resurse.uvt.ro) which contains examples of good practices (represented by a variety of educational resources, including textbooks, course materials, video training etc.). These actions were meant to encourage the teaching staff to use the new technologies creatively, to step out of their comfort zone and produce open educational resources (OERs), and to share online learning experiences. Meanwhile, students have the opportunity to participate in training sessions organized by the Center for Counselling and Career Orientation (CCCO) to become familiar with e-learning (see <https://www.facebook.com/pg/consiliere.uvt>) or Students’ Organization (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Screen capture of Students’ Union blogpost available at <https://osut.ro/desfasurarea-disciplinei-educatie-fizica-curs-general/> (*E-learning Webinars offered by Students’ Union: How to participate in Physical education - general course*).

3. Create a virtual space for your course within institutional e-learning platforms (LMS). The space will be used to upload materials, set assignments, schedule lectures, integrate discussions forums, and so on. According to Tony Bates (2020), “The LMS is where the students should go first”, so it is recommended to have a unitary approach not to generate confusion. At the level of our department we settled on a digital structure that seems to work well for both students and teachers, namely Google Classroom, Meet, and Zoom.

At the same time, teachers have to reconsider their curricula, abridge the study materials, adapt the assessment systems, consider e-portfolios as online assessment, and come up with alternative activities and tasks which replace group discussions. The first statistics we already have, covering the whole WUT academic community, show that during the first 7 days of online didactical activities, 4365 video conferences took place on Google Meet, with 48264 unique participants.

4. Prepare lessons for online teaching. One should keep in mind at all times that online teaching is different from f2f meetings - classes are not so engaging, the emotional ‘touch’ is missing, “distractions” might intervene, etc. It is therefore essential to know how to facilitate flexible learning during educational disruption (Huang et al., 2020) and to adapt the pedagogies accordingly. However, when it comes to digital education and pedagogical innovation, there are some downsides to which we do not have an answer yet: limiting online cheating, infusing equity in an online class, managing distractions etc.

5. Seek constant feedback from students. Our department sent an evaluation form to all BA and MA students. They were asked to assess the educational activities that had taken place online during the first two weeks. Their feedback revealed a need for: a unitary strategy, clear assignments, few emails sent close to the date and time scheduled for the courses and seminars. Professors should “balance digital with screen free activities” (OECD, 2020), avoid long lectures, and think of fun activities instead. Moreover, students are looking for reassurance: they need to see our human side, building community in the online classroom, since many of them are scared of the pandemic, frustrated but the overnight changes in lifestyle, tired and even overwhelmed by all the teachers’ requirements. Consequently, we need to take care of their mental wellbeing as well.

Thus, members of our department agreed that teachers should make a common plan, based on micro learning modules if possible, having simple and realistic objectives in mind, in such a way that we do not overload

students. We also agreed that we would use those teaching methods/tools with which students reported feeling comfortable.

Some of us had video lectures on Meet, while others recorded several short videos explaining concepts, setting tasks, and adding up to 15–30 minutes for students to work in collaboration. All the materials were posted/uploaded on Classroom, so that they were available for further reference (or to those who hadn't attended the video sessions).

Another teaching method we have successfully used for the past three years in order to engage and motivate students is based on MOOCs. Since 2015 WUT has supported open education (see <http://novamooc.uvt.ro>) and has included massive open online courses in the program (<http://dct.uvt.ro>) of complementary disciplines which generate transversal competencies - TCD (Bran & Grosseck, 2019). They are accessible to all students, from all majors. For example, "Learning English with Technology" was first created as a pilot SPOC (Small Private Online Course) by the authors of the current paper and included in the TCD program during the second semester of the 2017/2018 academic year. The course has been active since at <https://west-university-timisoara.teachable.com/>.

Another initiative set up four years ago regards the integration of OERs and MOOCs in particular courses. The students who participate in different MOOCs, with topics related to the curricula or their diploma papers receive credits for their activities in worldwide learning communities (Holotescu & Grosseck, 2018). In the transversal discipline "Digital Storytelling", for example, the coordinator includes parts of the course "Pixar in a Box" from Khan Academy in some of the learning units.

6. Communicate with social media. Grosseck, Malita and Bunoiu (2020) pointed out that students appreciate their university's presence on social media platforms. There are Facebook pages managed by WUT, its faculties and even some of its departments, Instagram accounts, live streaming of events, etc. In addition, each faculty / department uses groups to interact with students through social media. However, a small number of teachers communicate ideas, collaborate on projects, accept class work, and answer questions on these groups. Perhaps during this pandemic, in the absence of direct communication, it could be an effective way of putting educational messages across. Moreover, WUT encourages students by posting inspirational messages and photos on social media (#uvt happywall, the #StamAcasa campaign).

7. Other aspects to consider (sometimes depending on the department/specialization). During a crisis, issues revolving around health,

self-care, socio-emotional learning, balancing work and life, emotional hygiene, disinformation or burnout, equally affect both teachers, and students. How do we deal with the general context that is threatening our health? How do we surpass fear of the online world and how do we solve a refusal to use technology in lectures? What happens if, after the crisis is over, teachers will be the only ones to blame for the failures in education? How do we manage the anxiety, insecurity, and social noise? There is too much information out there, often contradictory and misleading, and everything happens very fast.

In this sense, WUT has developed some specific solutions such as a site that lists prevention methods (<http://masurideprevenitie.uvt.ro>), psychological support for the entire academic community (Figure 2), a webinar for managing anxiety offered by CCCO etc.

Figure 2. Screen capture of WUT Facebook page available at <https://www.facebook.com/uvtromania/posts/2885054134870720> (Psychological support offered to WUT academic community)

Simultaneously, the Department of Psychology has started a weekly publication, “Pastila de psihologie” (The psychological tablet), which is distributed to university members and the general public through Facebook (Figure 3) and the department's blog (<https://www.psihologietm.ro/#blog>).

Figure 3. Screen capture of Department of Psychology Facebook page available at <https://www.facebook.com/PsihoUVT/> (The “Psychological Tablet” on social media)

In this period, we are struggling to keep the “continuity, contact and care” (Gallagher, 2020), so the importance of such remote support resources to take care of mental wellbeing is unarguable.

4. Conclusions

There are no universal guidelines for how schools can function during an educational disruption, and even more dilemmas arise when we think about the post-COVID19 period. However, under the complicated health, social and economic circumstances, we can say that the West University of Timisoara has gone to great lengths in its endeavor to move classes online. The model we presented can be applied internationally, provided that educational institutions ask periodically for consistent feedback from their respective academic communities in order to make the optimal real-time decisions. Universities have full autonomy, but we believe it is helpful to have a digital teaching toolkit in each institution with recommended tools, webinars for students and teachers, teaching methods, different case studies, tips and tricks etc.

In broad lines, when pressing the RE**SET** button of the educational process, teachers/staff/decision makers might want to take these pillars into consideration: **Stability** (continue teaching your students), **Safety** (care for your students and care for yourself, too) and **Stay connected** (communicate with your students, be present whenever it is needed).

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