

The Future of Schools in the COVID context

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In January 2020, just months before the COVID crisis hit Europe, the World Economic Forum (WEF) produced a report on [Schools of the Future](#). They identified the critical characteristics in learning content and learning experiences that together define a high-quality education suitable for the fourth industrial revolution.

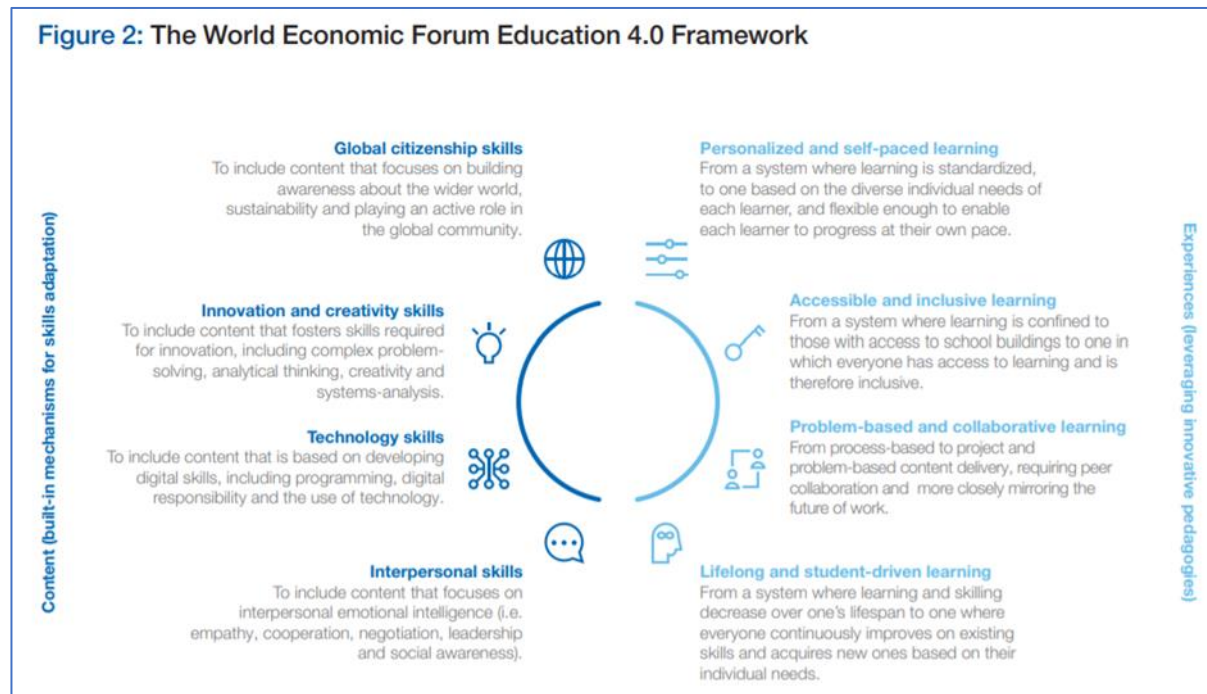


Figure: World Economic Forum Education 4.0 Framework (WEF, 2020, p. 7).

The report asserted that “the standardized model of direct learning”, dedicated to the “mass production of uniform talent” was increasingly out of synch with the needs of tomorrow’s economy and society. It called for a transformation of education systems from direct instruction and passive forms of learning, to “interactive methods that promote the critical and individual thinking needed for today’s innovation-driven economy” (WEF, 2020, p. 5).

The report did not foresee the COVID shock, although it did observe that, “In many parts of the world, learning is confined to only those with direct access to physical buildings” (WEF, 2020, pp. 5-6).

The WEF report still holds, although it should be read alongside a second, post-COVID survey, [Education Reimagined: The future of learning](#), sponsored by Microsoft and UNESCO (Fullan, Quinn, Drummy, & Gardner, 2020). This report identified three stages of response to the COVID crisis: (1) Disruption, and the initial response to lockdown; (2) Transition, with reopening during continued uncertainty; and (3) Reimagining, involving a vision for a new, more sustainable educational model:

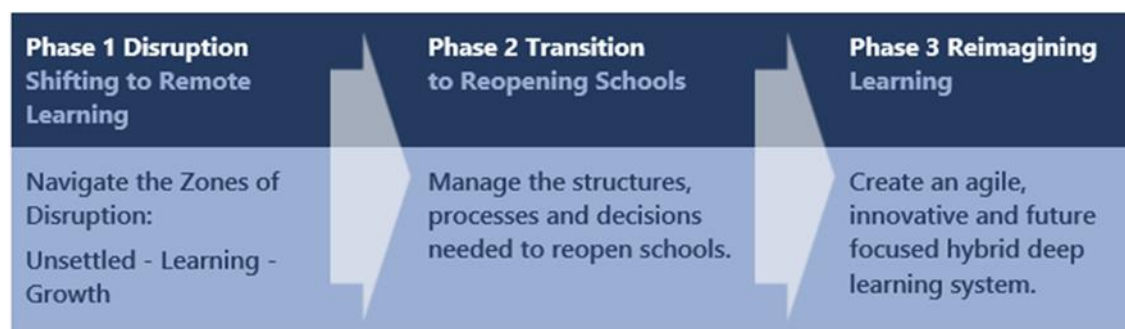


Figure: Three phases of response to the pandemic (Fullan et al., 2020, p. 3).

The argument is that the crisis has, if anything, amplified the need for a “paradigm shift” in education, and that technology has the capacity to accelerate the move to a more interactive, flexible, student-centred educational model (Fullan et al., 2020, pp. 1-2).

The possibility of rethinking education given what we have learned in lockdown is supported by the survey from the Brookings Institution, [Beyond Reopening Schools](#). The report argues that the school lies at the centre of an ecosystem of learning and support. This is a leap-frog moment, in which innovation has suddenly moved from the margins to the centre of the education system. Innovative pedagogies could be used alongside direct instruction, to move learning from remembering and understanding, to analysing and creating. Technology can be used in a way that doesn’t simply replace analogue approaches in teaching and learning (Vegas & Winthrop, 2020).

The October 2020 issue of *Prospects*, the journal of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education, focused on how education futures have been affected by the experience of the COVID crisis, featuring articles by Simona Popa, Michael Fullan, António [Nóvoa and Yara Alvim](#), Sir Ken Robinson, and others:

No-one saw it coming, and no-one knows how it will end

“We had zero foresight of the many changes the pandemic would bring to education and learning. And we hardly have any sense of the scale and range of what is to come” ([Popa, 2020](#)).

“Change *will* happen. We just do not know what it will look like” ([Fullan, 2020](#)).

Consensus about the need to take the opportunity to make positive change

“Neither a new world nor a new school will arise as a result of the pandemic ... schools will return to their traditional routines. But the pandemic revealed that, in addition to being necessary, change is urgent and possible” ([Nóvoa & Alvim, 2020](#)).

“The pandemic just made inevitable what was already needed” ([Nóvoa & Alvim, 2020](#)).

We have a “unique opportunity” for “a global reset of education” ([Robinson, 2020](#)).

Technology

The crisis exposed a fundamental weakness in the educational system that we have inherited. School systems rely on a single delivery system – classroom-based, age-graded schooling ([Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020](#)).

However, there is a link between technology and the enabling of a more student-centred approach:

“What emerges is a recognition that it is time to move beyond a blend of traditional teaching and online instruction, both happening within brick and mortar, to something more. The hybrid model combines the best of in-school and remote learning, with digital engagement. It is more than a quick fix. It is a way to enhance and accelerate learning by providing student-centred approaches to meet diverse learners’ needs” ([Fullan et al., 2020, p. 9](#)).

Curriculum

“The industry of modern schooling leads to surface learning of exaggeratedly voluminous curricula and excessively high-stakes assessments that instrumentalise the pursuit of knowledge” ([Hughes, 2020a](#)).

In his *Prospect* article, Conrad Hughes asserts a need to move to “a more mindful, authentic and humanly-paced approach”:

“When an entire learning system is interrupted, it is necessary to get to the core of learning, which is to say essential concepts and big understandings” (Hughes, 2020a).

Hughes (2020b) cites the [Universal Learning Programme](#), developed at the International School of Geneva in partnership with UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (IBE), which seeks to transcend the sterile debate between knowledge and skills, and is based on four pillars:

1. Character
2. Passion
3. Mastery
4. Collaboration

Assessment

Hughes (2020a) argues that online learning offers the opportunity to re-think the way we assess progress and attainment. He advocates creating alternative assessments – e.g. using *viva voce* settings, and projects.

Teaching and learning

What we learned in the Disruption phase was that traditional pedagogy does not transfer flawlessly to digital. Now is the time to expose teachers to learning how to engage students remotely and how to facilitate open-ended learning to foster curiosity, creativity and collaboration (Fullan et al., 2020, p. 14).

The first priority at lockdown was that learning didn't stop (Popa, 2020). The next order of business is to assure the quality of the learning.

When students learn online, good practice is to reduce contact time (Hughes, 2020a), thereby creating space. [Yong Zhao \(2020\)](#) asks whether we need to teach all the time, given that so many online teaching resources are already available. We ought to be able to show, in the course of the crisis, that it is possible for students to learn without us teaching them.

Zhao also asks the seemingly naïve question, does learning only take place in the classroom?

Nóvoa and Alvim (2020) argue that need to rethink the dedicated, delimited school space:

It is necessary to transform the organizational structure of the school. We all know of the nineteenth-century great historical project for the normalization of the school: spaces, times, curricula, assessment of learning, role of teachers, grouping of students... Today, the opposite movement is required: diversification of spaces and times, curricula and forms of assessment, the work of teachers and students.

What does this mean? The creation of new educational environments, very different from the traditional classroom space, which allow individual study and group work, monitoring by teachers, and research projects, face-to-face, and digital work. Metaphorically, we can imagine these new environments as a large library: some students study alone, connected to the internet or not; others work in groups; others discuss with one or more teachers; others develop a research project; others present their work; others are in contact with people outside, perhaps even abroad.

Nóvoa and Alvim (2020) also argue for the need to re-think the focus on the lesson as the basis of pedagogy:

The idea of a standard pedagogy around the lesson has to give way to pedagogies that value a diversity of methods and modalities of study and work. The lesson has an important function, as a space for synthesis, but can never be the exclusive, or even the main, activity. Pedagogy cannot revolve around 'lesson' but, rather, 'study'.

What does this mean? A profound change in the day-to-day school life of students and teachers. On one hand, removing students from the 'school desk' and putting them on an active search for knowledge. On the other hand, emphasizing the responsibility of teachers in relation to the

overall educational work (organizing contents and research, monitoring, tutoring, support, etc., and not just 'lessons'), reinforcing their collaborative action and their autonomy in the production of pedagogical and curricular knowledge.

In this context, collaboration becomes crucial (Nóvoa & Alvim, 2020):

The best responses to the pandemic were the result of collaboration between groups of teachers, from the same school and from different schools, who were able to present innovative ideas and projects, maintaining links with students and managing to keep them mobilized from the point of view of knowledge, learning, and education.

Finally, Michael Fullan and colleagues argue that the enforced tectonic shift in the use of digital technology should be harnessed to pent-up, pre-COVID demand for more student-centred learning, giving it a transformative potential.

The prevailing model of schooling was built on two organizing (and confining) constructs: time (when kids learned) and space (where they learned). These two constructs were useful in the 1800 and 1900's [sic] but the COVID disruption has rendered them redundant. Students can learn and demonstrate this learning without bricks and mortar or bell times. With digital and deep learning, students can learn where they are. Students can learn when they are ready (Fullan et al., 2020, p. 15).

Students who thrived in the remote environment during the pandemic, demonstrated competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, resilience, independence as learners, self-regulation, cognitive flexibility and perseverance. These are the attributes that are noted as critical for future employability across industries and geographies ... The challenge is to integrate the best of what we have learned from this remote phase with the new skill set required for the future (Fullan et al., 2020, p. 16).

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