

Pandemic education and Virtual space. Challenges and dangers

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Abstract: *The appearance of COVID-19 has brought humanity to true heights of despair, as Emil Cioran had launched the idea almost a century ago. The explosion of cases of disease worldwide has led authorities everywhere to institute unique measures, unprecedented so far, decisions that we have all hardly accepted. The school, regardless of its level of education, has not escaped these measures. Thus, starting with March 2020, education, worldwide, has periodically oscillated between real-world activities in the classroom, when the situation allowed it and, unfortunately, in most cases, courses held with the help of e-learning platforms in the virtual world. What were and still are the challenges? How have teachers adapted and are adapting to this system of work? What were and still are the dangers? Here are just a few of the many questions we are trying to answer in this text.*

Keywords: *education, e-learning, challenges, dangers, adaptation*

We, human beings, had to face a pandemic to be willing to start changing our daily habits. Society had to be hit by something that had never been seen before so that it would finally start a comprehensive process of modernizing the education process. At least in Romania, if not worldwide, where, for decades, despite the exceptional results of our children in the world, thanks to the education received in schools, everything has remained “stuck on the project”. It is a reflection of ideas exposed with so much charm by Ion Luca Caragiale, towards the end of the 19th century: “Either this or that, if you allow me: either to be reviewed, I agree! But do not change anything: or not to be reviewed, I agree! But then change it here and there, just the essential parts”

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(Caragiale, 1939). In the midst of technological development, the Romanian society, otherwise ranking first in terms of the Internet speed and the possession of new mobile communication devices, in terms of education paradoxically ranks last, still preferring explanations on the blackboard and the eternal piece of chalk, or long dictation lectures.

Practically, the educators and trainers confronted themselves with the accomplished fact (what irony: It was the people who put others, in history, in this position to be themselves caught unprepared!). They, the educators and trainers from the Romanian education system, found that, when entering the virtual mode, whether we are talking about the online full version of courses, or their abridged version, the situation looks like this:

- The Romanian education system is only partially prepared for this new method of teaching imposed by the pandemic, although technologically, as previously stated, Romanian society is at the top of rankings regarding many aspects related to technology;
- A good part of the teaching staff can certify their digital skills only on paper and on CVs, lacking real practice;
- The educational curriculum is not adapted to this mode of education, many of the files and analytical programs of the disciplines still remaining at the stage of classical education;
- There are only partial incentives for the IT sector to support the development of those components, educational platforms, that are focused on the new requirements imposed by the pandemic context, as if expecting a divine solution and the self-disappearance of viruses that have triggered this global "lock-down".

And all this in the context in which the authorities approved in 2015 a National Strategy on the Digital Agenda for Romania targeting the year 2020¹, precisely this year in which the Romanian society is deeply challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. On paper, things look beautiful, the ideas stated by the representatives of the relevant institutions are sublime, but, to return to, our beloved Caragiale, they are missing, in real terms, almost completely. Now we must not generalize the issue of education in digital format based on the

1 The National Strategy for the Digital Agenda focuses on the following lines of implementation: 1. e-Governance, Interoperability, Cyber Security, Cloud Computing and Social Media – an area aimed at increasing efficiency and reducing public sector costs in Romania through modernizing administration; 2. ICT in education, health, culture and eInclusion — scope for supporting these technologies at sectoral level; 3. eCommerce, R&D and innovation in ICT – an area which targets the regional comparative advantages of Romania and supports private economic growth; 4. Broadband and digital infrastructure services – an area aimed at providing access conditions to ICT and Internet equipment, in order to increase digital literacy and improve digital skills (cf. <https://www.comunicatii.gov.ro/agenda-digitala-pentru-romania-2020/>).

provisions of the official document mentioned above because, as the reality shows, there are many educational institutions that have met much of the requirements of the Strategy. However, we must also look at the less pleasant aspects which, here, with the evolution of the pandemic, come to the surface bringing to the fore the flaws, the errors of a project, so wonderful on paper, but so superficially applied, from the center, in practice¹.

We must recognize and accept, even if it sometimes contradicts our existential principles deeply imprinted in the collective mind, that we are in the stage of an accelerated development of society, a development that brings with it multiple consequences, or transformations on every human being. The modern human beings, the *homo tehologicus virtualis*, are forced to consume their existence in a space with a dizzying evolution and fluidity that they come to perceive as hostile. This is the pattern of the new individual, the *tehologicus virtualis* human, a human-technical hybrid, but not at the level of the frightening cyborgs encountered in Star Trek, the creation of Gene Roddenberry, but closer to our reality, a human being increasingly dependent on the technology which they have at hand, a human being that has permanently at hand various portable communication and entertainment equipment. Once taken out of this comfort zone, they become more and more insecure and anxious, always feeling useless and much more friendless.

The *homo tehologicus virtualis* is one who increasingly believes that their entire existence is no longer dependent on a specific location, on a geographically stationary point, with IT technology enabling them to communicate on a planetary scale, regardless of physical distance. Their existential duality goes between the daily humdrum and an idealized virtual world, a Second Life², with the dangers well known from a psychological point of view, in which everything is built to ensure their much desired comfort.

Technological development also fully contributes to the destruction of the classic human being, the new gadgets offering more and more faithful sensations to the natural ones, from the close environment, the moment when the devices installed in the house will offer everything from floral aromas to the sensation of rain, wind, etc. Being closer to reality, the gadgets being in the experimental phase in the super-technological countries.

1 National Strategy Monitoring and Evaluation Manual for the Digital Agenda for Romania (cf. https://www.comunicatii.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Manual_Monitorizare_Evaluare_v2.0-BM.pdf).

2 A digital double life, with “fortunes” to match, in which even the disappearance of the being is negotiated, the Facebook network, but not only it, offering the account holder the possibility to choose what will happen to the digital version of the individual after his disappearance in physical plan.

Thus, once this connection with technology is created, the demands of the modern human beings increase. Their expectations in relation to the gadget's options are commensurate: artificial sensations enhanced to the maximum, flora and fauna rendered as naturally as possible through the liquid crystals of smart TVs.

On the other hand, simultaneously with the transfer to the virtual, the importance and notoriety of the individuals are no longer as essential for them to be known by other community members. The new dimension of living entitles them to be celebrities themselves.

The virtual environment is a catalyst in the negative sense of the notion of social interaction. The *homo tehologicus virtualis* is getting further and further away from the real world, more and more cases of agoraphobia appear, that fear of interacting with others. Their behavior is strictly dependent on the experiences they live in the virtual¹. The lack of the canons of real reality inoculate the users with the idea that they are allowed anything, that they can break the laws.

As a projection into the future, no one can know how the *homo tehologicus virtualis* will evolve, no one has the slightest idea today what the future of humanity, made up of this series of individuals from this era of *tehologicus virtualis*, one in the playful phase of its existence, will look like. What we can say for sure is that the path that modern human beings, the children of today, the adults of tomorrow, are taking now, is an irreversible one, with no way back.

This is therefore the pattern of the child with whom the current educator and trainer meet in most situations, a teacher who, unlike the pupil/student, is forced to learn technology, to adapt to it. Until recently, the education that the child was receiving in school could, in most cases, be sufficient to guide and survive in society. Meanwhile, with technological developments, things have changed dramatically, with the student having to prepare for a new lifestyle and training all based on lifelong learning, their survival depending on their adaptability to new environmental challenges. They must be educated for any situation, including that of retraining, of forgetting everything he they once learned. This pandemic that today's society is facing is the best example in this regard.

Digital competences have long been in the educational process. They have demonstrated their true value in this fateful year 2020, when from March to now, education has been held in a two-dimensional system. Now, everything depends on how each teacher masters the digital resources that become an

1 Social and cultural conventions are being transformed, since time immemorial the new man “asks for friendship” or “breaks friendship” with people from any part of the world, whom he will probably never meet.

indispensable tool for the success of qualitative education, combined with the new social dimensions and according to the interests and expectations of children, these *homo technologicus virtualis*.¹

Looking at things as a whole, the basic institution of the educational process, the school, appears in a not very honorable place when it comes to changing and adapting the educational content to the e-learning offer, the concept of “frozen project” being the defining element for the overall image. The skepticism of educators and trainers about change is also doubled by the lack of data on the effectiveness of this type of education in relation to traditional education. In addition, to this reluctance can be added the slowness with which the aspect related to the relationship between technology and the educational process is debated and the promotion of the idea of complementarity, in accordance with the new skills conferred by technology, those “soft skills” (Ceobanu, 2020).

It is extremely well known that, taking into account the data provided by the National Association for Continuous Development of Youth in Romania (2009) on digital literacy² of the Romanian population³, for today's teachers to look for those digital resources that meet the needs and the expectations of the new generation is if not a torment, at least a real challenge, one that we also find on the other side, of the students put in front of the fact of assimilating an extremely voluminous virtual information volume, much above, perhaps, their absorption capacity.

In these conditions it is important that the trainer/educator prepares the child/student, but also to educate himself/herself in the same line, to face the

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- 1 By the way, in addition to the above, the experience of the last months spent in this virtual teaching system confirms that today's young people increasingly appreciate the lessons in which the teacher does not teach the lesson for 40 minutes (the limit imposed by Zoom, the most used platform in the teaching process) but also comes with descriptive elements, either audio or video related to the theoretical elements exposed.
 - 2 *digital literacy* — taking over information from several sources, assessing its credibility and usefulness, based on well-established criteria, as well as ‘the ability to solve tasks involving the location of information, linked to an unknown context, under ambiguous conditions and without explicit indications’ (OECD, 2015).
 - 3 Romania has the lowest percentage of people with basic global digital skills or above the basic average (29% of all interviewers) in 28 EU countries (Eurostat, 2017). Apart from this, 32% of the workforce in the EU has insufficient digital skills, with 13% evaluated as being of no value (idem). It should also be noted that, across the EU, 42% of citizens without computer skills are inactive in the labor market. In Romania (94%) the most disadvantaged have low digital skills or no digital skills¹ (Digital Diagram Agenda 2014 - Inclusion and digital skills). We mention that Romania also has a negative situation regarding digital skills in enterprises. For example, the percentage of companies that provided training for the development/ improvement of their staff's ICT skills is 5% of the total, compared to the EU 28 average of 19% (Eurostat database, last updated in 2014).

new challenges, to acquire specific skills and abilities. At the same time, the new form of education must overcome the stage classic linear, which ends with each school training cycle, and move to the level of continuous training, unlimited in time.

Although with obvious advantages in the act of educating *homo technologicus virtualis*, this way of interaction in online has huge problems that can only be solved by face-to-face, in physical terms. As in the case of pre-university education, more and more voices are emerging in academia, where physical interaction, where relationships can be linked and relationships can be established based on mimico-gestual interpretation, tone of voice, etc. These are crucial to the success of a lesson. In addition, in the classroom, in the course of one class, personalized support can be given to people with certain problems.

In fact, a study by Botnariuc, Cucosu, Ștefănescu & Velea (2020), published under the aegis of the University of Bucharest, identifies no less than six elements which are seriously affected by the online passage of education

| Disrupted activities | Percent |
|--|----------------|
| Personalized support for students with special learning needs | 63.8 % |
| Authentic communication (human relationship) | 65.3 % |
| Monitoring the process of learning | 51.7 % |
| Feedback for prompt correction or confirmation of received information | 45.3 % |
| Explanations for understanding concepts, relationships, phenomena | 45.1 % |
| Individual counseling | 36.3 % |
| Others... | 3.2 % |

Among the difficulties in performing virtual activities, in the teacher sector, there have been identified among others in addition to the weak digital literacy: difficulties with the online platforms used, lack of teaching support for the use of new technologies so that educational work is done in the most attractive way for pupils/students, lack of appropriate teaching-learning tools, lack of models/digital resources for teaching subjects, lack of a sufficiently performing terminal. In addition, a large proportion of teachers have also cited the lack of time needed for the proper understanding and use of digital tools and resources.

On the other hand, numerous studies conducted among students across the country complain about a lack of a clear strategy for online education, blaming the large amount of information they have to access every week, sometimes even dozens of pages of pure theory for just one discipline, with students/pupils increasingly demanding digitization of teaching content and presentation in a more schematic and attractive form for virtual reading.

Taking this factor into account, educational institutions must come up with concrete solutions for adapting information focused on: *autonomy, flexibility, capacity for cooperation and dialogue*. In this reform of the process, we must understand this fact, the paradigm of the role of the teacher changes in the sense that they approach differently the way of thinking of the whole process, they constantly review, based on the feedback received, their behavior and attitudes, continuously learning and eliminating routine from daily activities.

Based on the fact that online education involves the existence of three characteristic elements which are fully dependent on each other (technology, education, training), a number of factors can be defined to support the whole pedagogical approach:

- Adopting the new style of teaching and accepting it as an alternative way in the educational process;
- Clear establishment of the advantages and disadvantages of the technology used in the process;
- The effective identification and exploitation of the assets offered by this method of teaching;
- Documentation of all existing education in the virtual world, testing and choosing the most effective according to educational needs;
- Self-education and improvement on the line of online education through research on new directions at local/national/international level.

These are the six factors that can transform, from the perspective of the teacher/educator/trainer, a virtual lesson in a success.

In order to better define the whole process of education in the online system, we also remember the secondary components, namely: technology

interactivity (whether reactive¹, co-active², or proactive³), hypertext assimilation and multimedia content.

Cyberbullying. Danger during classes

It goes without saying that the new generation, born after 1990, is the first to see virtual technology as an indispensable asset whose existence cannot be dispensed with. The majority of child-to-adult conflicts arise from differences in the perception of the impact of virtual activities on children/young people. There are also situations where parents ignore the first symptoms that the virtual environment generates on the child's psyche. The child shall, in turn, refuse advice received with the effects which arise: behavioral disturbances, health problems, or worse, victims of virtual aggression (identity theft, kidnapping, rape⁴ etc).

The child is tormented, harassed, humiliated, placed in an unpleasant situation, or otherwise victimized by another child through the use of the Internet, digital or interactive technologies or mobile phones. This is the case with virtual cyberbullying (American Association of School Administrators, 2009), or virtual intimidation with nerve. In contrast to real physical aggression, online we don't have Powerful vs. Weak, here everyone is equally protected by the possibility of creating false accounts from which many attacks can be performed. Able to hide their identity, the weak, most physically potent victims of real space, can turn into a virtual world of ferocious aggressors⁵.

1 The student's response to certain teacher presentations.

2 The ability to adapt to technology.

3 Stimulating the student in the constructive solution of certain exposed situations.

4 Virtual violence, as an act with sexual implications, can be defined as that attack by means of forms of expression specific to journalism and marketing, by malicious organizations or individuals, usually premeditated; the attack targets communities, groups, vulnerable, physical, intellectual, sexual, racial, etc., or individually a person belonging to those groups, with a clearly defined aim: obtaining undue benefit, confidential data or sexual services.

5 According to a study conducted in 2017, 65% of young Romanians admit that they were directly marked by harassment suffered online and even noticed involuntary behavioral changes that followed the aggression. Most say that such incidents have lowered their self-confidence and led them to isolate themselves from others. Fewer, but not to be neglected, are those who said they became depressed (20%) or made up for the lack of friends online through alcohol or drug use (5%). Moreover, 84% of the respondents say that they witnessed such an attack, without being aggressors or victims, but only 36% intervened in the conflict between the two parties. Although most would have liked to take the side of the harassed, most become indifferent or even aggressors for fear of being attacked in turn and, therefore, turned into victims. (<https://www.bitdefender.ro/news/80-dintre-adolescenti-au-fost-hartuiti-pe-internet-aspectul-fizic-pasiunile-si-situatia-materiala-principalele-motive-3393.html>).

At the same time, children in Romania are the most assaulted in the “sexting”¹ chapter, with more and more reporting to the polling operators that they have seen or received messages with sexual implications transmitted online² (Sacco & al., 2010).

The most common forms of aggression that children, in particular, have to face are: the rumor, the ridiculing of the victim; insults; the threat; distribution of offensive.

The emotional impact of the attacks is a major one, with the victims of cyberbullying suffering conditions of violence, anger, sadness or apathy³.

UNICEF⁴ recommendations for combating cyberbullying under the conditions imposed by online courses, in the current pandemic context, provide for action in the following areas:

- The authorities are asked to strengthen the main child protection services in order to ensure that they remain open and active throughout the pandemic. All social protection workers should be trained on the effects that COVID-19 can have on the welfare of children, including increased online risks. The authorities should step up public awareness-raising initiatives regarding the online safety of children and ensure that all representatives of the social services, schools, parents and children are aware of the mechanisms for local reporting of cases arising either from a dedicated telephone line created or telephone numbers made available by various authorities/directorates;
- Administrators of social networks, e-learning platforms etc must ensure that they have implemented enhanced safety and safeguard measures, in particular virtual learning tools, and that they are clearly accessible to educators, parents and children. They must promote and facilitate guidance services by creating child safety support lines. They are also required to develop standard moderation policies that are aligned with

1 Phenomenon perceived as the realization by young people of messages with explicit sexual content, of photos with the same theme regarding themselves or people in their close environment and their transmission to other people of the same age as them or close.

2 Of those exposed, 28% said they felt offended (children aged 11 to 16). 32% of young people in Romania chatted on the internet with strangers, 13% of children even meeting such people, stating that many strangers were friends (Livingstone & al., 2011).

3 In order to reduce the extent of the state of anguish, parents questioned in recent times recognize that they are extremely attentive to the online content accessed, in the case of children under 10, from the age of 7. The percentage of attention is reduced in parents with children aged 11-14 years and over when adolescents reach 15-18 years.

4 The recommendations were made public on 15 April 2020 on the organization's website (<https://www.unicef.org/romania/press-releases/children-increased-risk-harm-online-during-global-covid-19-pandemic-unicef>).

children's rights, as well as to provide internet connectivity to improve access for disadvantaged children in low-income households;

- Schools should update current protection policies to reflect new realities for children learning at home. Educational institutions should promote and monitor online activities and ensure that all children have continuous access to school counseling services;
- Parents should ensure that the devices provided to their children have the latest software updates and antivirus programs. On the other hand, they must maintain an open dialogue about how and with whom the children communicate online, to involve them constructively in establishing a set of rules for how, when and where the Internet can be used. Parents should also be aware of the signs of suffering in children that may occur in connection with their online activity and last but not least be aware of school policies and local mechanisms for reporting cases of cyberbullying.

The Romanian authorities have become aware of the danger of such a situation facing the child. Thus, after several years of discussion, the Romanian Parliament adopted what is known as the “anti-bullying law” which the President Administration promulgated on 18 November 2019. Basically, it is a draft law amending and supplementing the National Education Act with specifications on this form of violence.

Conclusions

The research work carried out during the PhD period led me at the end of the project to set out a number of issues as recommendations for relations with the virtual and educational environment, which, six years after the public presentation of the thesis and five years after their official publication, demonstrate their validity. Here, briefly, some of the recommendations made then, in 2014, still widely applicable, especially in this context (Onofrei, 2015):

- It is increasingly necessary to rethink the parent-child interaction, teacher-pupil, virtual community-real-space community, while at the same time making more efficient filtering of content promoted by online media;
- In the context of the increasingly rapid development of the virtual environment, the education of small children must be adapted to the new dimensions;
- Parents must explain to the child that, despite the false appearance of freedom conferred by the online environment, there are some limits to which they must submit;
- Combating cyberbullying must be focused on a number of directions involving both the family environment, the school environment and the authorities;

- Information and education campaigns for vulnerable groups to virtual attacks will be built on two components: preventive and reactive and will take into account the significant elements of a virtual space attack;
- Another direction of action in combating the phenomenon of violence in the school environment refers to the professional orientation of students¹. The existing state of tension is largely caused by the lack of future prospects for young people. In addition to adapting the curriculum to the requirements imposed by market dynamics, an important role in the education of adolescents is played by vocational guidance centers in schools, whose purpose is to provide future graduates with the appropriate career path;
- School heads will also have to review internal regulations in order to take into account: sanctioning new forms of violence: cyberbullying, sexting;
- Introduce, in the school curriculum, some courses that will shape the students thinking and prepare them for the relationship with the virtual world through specialized courses (social media; cyber security etc.).

From the other perspective, of the teaching process itself, there is a need more than ever, by analyzing all the information, to develop a new strategy in education, in the medium and long term, on the basis of policies that are publicly debated and assumed by all decision-makers. More than ever, it is necessary to implement measures to genuinely computerize the education system and redesign it on new socio-technological dimensions, in line with the expectations of the new *homo technologicus virtualis*.

It is also necessary to train teaching staff and improve them according to technological developments, to edit educational content in digital form, and to create an effective management system for the new teaching style, especially in the direction of a fruitful exchange of ideas with various IT-related entities, e-learning.

In the teacher-student relationship, the teacher may face, despite the facilities provided by technology, a non-combat reaction from the student, especially if they, the students, do not feel fully motivated to participate in virtual lessons, or if they enter classes already tired due to other related activities carried out at home, domestic, or determined by playing virtual games, etc. In addition, not all teaching disciplines are suitable to be supported

1 The Singapore authorities have launched a comprehensive initiative to study the future of the labor market. Their approach seeks to establish the typology of jobs in the context of technological development and automation of current tasks performed with human force. Thus, they try to obtain an overview that will help them in establishing strategies necessary for the retraining of current workers, threatened with job loss or for readjusting the educational program.

virtually, many of them requiring complex activities that can be reproduced only in laboratory conditions.

At the same time, the issues raised by new factors in the area of virtual education, digital divide or digital segregation¹, digital literacy, which we also mentioned in computer literacy² (Ceobanu, 2020), must be acknowledged and resolved.

On the other hand, we must accept that this educational system, with all the dangers arising from the action, offers participants, both teachers and pupils/students the opportunity to self-form, to develop their creative abilities during lessons, to analyze and synthesize, developing a critical and logical thinking, to optimize the taught/assimilated content, as well as an increase of the degree of responsibility among the pupils/students.

Finally, I would like to briefly present to you the conclusions of a recent meeting between the leaders of Romania's most important staff recruitment companies, which is centered precisely on the issue of the pandemic and its effects on the human resources sector. By extension, conclusions can be easily applied to the academic and training environment of future employees.

By mutual agreement, the representatives of those companies have identified as essential conditions, qualities necessary for survival in the new dimension generated by the pandemic context the following issues³:

- Ability to learn continuously;
- Flexibility and fast adaptation to unforeseen situations;
- Creativity adapted to the ever faster development of A.I.;
- Social intelligence, based on their ability to interact virtually through social networks.

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- 1 That financial gap, which shows differences between poor families, which cannot afford much spending on technology acquisition and wealthy families, in Romania in 2020, with a great many communities, especially in rural areas, where this gap is ubiquitous.
 - 2 The ability to use easily, without stress and without obvious discomfort, the technology provided by the IT sector in the field of activity, fully understanding how it works, the advantages of the software at hand.
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