Reflecting on what COVID-19 means for my research as a doctoral student

This blog post has been contributed by Ryan Williams.

The global spread of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns have resulted in schools being shut all around the world. It is estimated that 1.2 billion students have been affected due to the measures taken by affected countries to stem the outbreak (UNESCO 2020). From early years to doctoral candidates, learners have been forced to stay at home amid the pandemic, consequently, changing education in a dramatic manner. Amongst the chaos, the education technology and online learning sector have been presented with the biggest opportunity with the rise of e-learning, whereby classes are conducted remotely and online. Some schools and educational institutes have managed to adapt some have not.

Notwithstanding the social, political and economic factors that influence the use of EdTech, some technologies have played a crucial role in ensuring that learning providers (schools, colleges, and universities) deliver learning through means that resonate across generations. When I first began my doctoral research exploring how social networking sites can be implemented into pedagogy successfully, it was still an interesting yet undefined form of pedagogy for many educators. However, since COVID-19, remote learning has become the new norm for students and teachers with many of the widely-known challenges being obliterated. To ensure minimum disruption to education programmes, institutes recognised the importance of unlocking the potential of technology for effective remote learning. In other words, the pandemic has brought online learning to the forefront of conversations in education and in the commercial world.

Discussions around remote learning are pertinent in my experience of using social media in education. Many news outlets have been fielding institutions to account for their lack of contact with students during the lockdown with communication and mental health being themes generated in this discourse (see Wilde 2020; Winni-Zhou 2020). I argue that social media plays a vital role in people’s lives, even more so during the lockdown due to the potential connectivity that is generated. There is evidence to suggest that social media can improve confidence, social wellbeing and creativity in learners (Lewis 2017). 21st century learning sceptics have often cited cyberbullying and online abuse on social media platforms as issues which must be addressed before any serious discussions around social media in pedagogy can be held. However, during this period of enhanced remote learning terms such as ‘TEL’, ‘EdTech’ and ‘e-learning’ have appeared at the forefront of an education agenda, and social media abuse appears to be reducing (see Jardine 2020). Furthermore, Jardine (2020) argues that the crisis is helping educators to realise the positive benefits of using social media for pedagogy.

As part of my research, I sent a survey out to UK educators in January 2020 and so far I have collected almost 350 responses. However, since the lockdown it has become increasingly difficult to engage in interaction with teachers in my research. Upon reflection, I decided to rework my survey email and include details about how my research relates in with the current agenda of remote learning. Since I revised my email, my response rates have improved significantly. At times, having the ability to be both proactive and reactive in research is important and I look forward to how I can further develop as a researcher throughout this journey.

Microsoft has assisted schools in the UK in establishing remote learning to help the students continue to learn while at home. In the UK, around 27,000 schools are using Office 365, Skype in the Classroom, Minecraft: Education Edition and Microsoft Teams. Teams enable lessons to be run remotely by connecting students and teachers over video-enabled remote classrooms. They also provide a host of collaborative and interactive tools which help digitally pro-

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