

Online - distance learning and the changing role of a teacher

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Abstract. The main purpose of this paper is to unfold the experience regarding the changing role of teachers. This study displays at first the parameters of online and distance learning in order to contribute to an accurate and comparative consideration regarding them and the traditional methods of teaching. Focusing on the differences and similarities between these pillars of education will help us understand the significant impact of the new era of e-learning by distance in the conventional education and explore the current dimensions of the new and always changing role of teachers.

Keywords: *Online-distance learning, education, changing role of teachers.*

1. Introduction

The educational process is a "cultural invention", in the sense that individuals prepare themselves for integration into society based on cultural goods and social values. Within the educational environment individuals prepare themselves to join society by developing themselves, their knowledge, abilities, and skills, but always in relation to the external environment. At the same time, they encounter mechanisms of acceptance and rejection, while they also become familiar with processes of receiving and memorizing information useful for the future (Σοφός et al. 2015, p. 14), a process which is the basis of every form of learning (Τριάρχου 2015, p. 127). However, in modern society the learning process, as well as a lot of our activities, is now influenced and unfolded within the grid of the dominance of digital technology. This flood of smart devices and internet has as a result the eruption of an "intangible interaction", which can be demonized - and often not unjustly - with features of coldness and isolation, but in times of economic and health crisis could offer perhaps the only possibility of a low cost communication (Σαντορινάιος et al. 2015, p. 14).

Focusing on these parameters, this paper will investigate the impact of distance education on the conventional one, with a view to upgrading the changing role of teachers.

2. Conventional and Online Education

Education has not always had the current form that we know, appreciate, and accept. In periods when the learning process was not institutionalized - e.g., in societies with simple structures, such as those of hunters - knowledge took place simply through imitation or control based on prejudice and ritual and through processes, such as demonstration and narration. In more developed societies, where teaching had the meaning of organized process, the educational framework was characterized by face-to-face teaching, however based on dialogue. The existence of different structures of society has caused a differentiation of the institutional organization of education based on criteria, such as age, type of school, curriculum and has driven, therefore, the appearance of a special type of distance. Within a classroom of many learners there are a lot of different opinions and this difference of point of view among the students creates surprisingly a huge need for a lecture-based education. And although we are talking about a learning environment with physical presence, we observe a different kind of distance (Σοφός et al. 2015, p. 15).

At this point, however, attention must be paid to the role of the instructor during the learning process. The teacher takes the role of tutor-facilitator, who is responsible for the curriculum. However, he does not provide sterile knowledge and intervenes in a coordinating manner. The aim is to support learners and to enhance the learning process through strategies that help students acquire knowledge and develop their skills. For this reason, the need for a student-centered and problem-based learning is more than ever obvious and this must be reflected in both the educational work of the teacher and the curriculum (Τριάρχου 2015, pp. 138, 142).

Related to aforementioned facts, a careful observation of the evolution of education in relation to space and time leads to the conclusion that education and distance are two concepts inextricably linked. However, this point of view is not easily understood. One should be aware of the evolutionary course of teaching, as well as the parameters of distance besides the physical presence. In education the element of distance is not being observed only related to the lack of physical presence. Distance in an educational environment can be communicative, social, or even psychological. In addition, distance is created when the structures of an educational institution or an educational process do not allow interaction. Two-way communication, interaction with others and educational material, as well as learning needs are factors which could eliminate distance and vice versa. From a pedagogical point of view distance can be therefore created even in environments with physical presence and put in danger the educational process (Σοφός et al. 2015, p. 16).

A typical example is an educational environment where the central role is played by the instructor and not the learner, a fact that does not allow interaction between individuals and

undermines the learning process by preventing a deeper understanding of knowledge and focusing exclusively on memorization (Τριάρχου 2015, p. 141), while another kind of example, is the choice not to take seriously the potential learning difficulties that some students have. Not every learner learns in the same way and when a student cannot learn in the usual ways, it does not mean that there is no other way for this to happen. At this point, technology and teaching strategies can effectively contribute to overcoming obstacles (Τζιβινίκου 2015, p. 17).

In modern society, education is characterized by the so-called didactic square - learner, teacher, content, media (Σοφός et al. 2015, p. 16) - and our goal is to reduce the negative impact of any distance during the learning process by utilizing technology in traditional or distance learning. "The architectural construction of digital media enables the space-time distance and at the same time its impairment, reconnecting the individual with the creators of ideas through modern electronic environments, recovering so and restoring the media-mediated interaction between individuals" (Σοφός et al. 2015, p. 16). In fact, digital technology has often a complementary effect with amazing results on the traditional form of education and a typical example is the electronic-digital libraries, a tool that is now universally accepted. This is not the case with virtual libraries, but of a combination of physical and digital ones. The physical library still exists, but some of its services and collections are also offered electronically through a repository of digital objects enhancing its efficiency and expanding the possibilities of its utilization (Δημητρούλια & Τικτοπούλου 2015, p. 128, Παππάς et al., p. 127).

Therefore, we must now focus on a general and more comprehensive prism of educational processes and take into consideration all the parameters and not only the physical presence. During the perpetual confrontation between traditional and online education a scientific dialogue or debate has been developed. Advantages and disadvantages of both forms of education are contrasted and depending on the conditions and circumstances educational organizations must choose between conventional learning method and its online counterpart, always based on the benefit of the students (Σοφός et al. 2015, p. 16).

We live in a society where digitalism has taken over much of our lives and our communication. The relevant reflection is not temporary, the impact of New Media on our lives has been hotly debated since the appearance of personal computers during the 80's (Δημητρούλια & Τικτοπούλου 2015, p. 11). However, in the educational framework it is important to identify the reasons why these different learning environments were created.

Conventional teaching takes place in an environment that supports face-to-face communication between learner-instructor, learner-learner and the interaction between them and facilitates cooperation, teamwork, relationship development, while the specific spaces which protect against external noise and promote the teaching and learning process of this form are perceived as closed spaces isolated from the external environment and create conditions for the connection of individuals with each other and with the environment (Σοφός et al. 2015, pp. 31-33).

The digital learning environment eliminates many of the aforementioned features and, depending on its form, can support modern teaching and interaction, but in other forms and

under restrictions, without the immediacy and many of the advantages mentioned above. However, it facilitates the participation of people with physical distance due to health, professional or other reasons, expands the conditions of monitoring, offers access to a huge variety of educational material, promotes skills of self-control and self-discipline, and is distinguished by flexibility.

It's more than obvious that both environments were created out of the need to provide the appropriate teaching and learning environment according to special conditions and restrictions and this conclusion should be taken into consideration by both the proponents and the opponents of the aforementioned forms of education.

3. The new and changing role of teachers

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, education at several institutions was taking place in the form of e-learning by distance. More specifically, courses were carried out by the method of distance education, following literally the timetable during the traditional teaching, supported however by specific platforms of both synchronous and asynchronous education. By the implementation of this mixed form of the two kinds of education, which was being applied to cover the needs of the learners, the most significant role was being played by the teachers. It is of great importance to point out the new characteristics of teachers regarding the so-called blended education model, because these elements significantly continue to contribute to the current form of the educational process.

The experience gained from this sudden and not easy transition to the digital learning environment has many positive results. The most important one is the changing role of teachers. The role of teachers is no longer limited to the instructional dimension, which we already knew and were used to, but has acquired other equally important dimensions.

Teachers should contribute to the transmission of knowledge, answer questions, clarify issues of their subjects, and provide guidance to learners; however, this teaching dimension (instructional role) is enriched with skills of creating or finding educational material and sources and directing learners towards an autonomous learning.

In addition to the above-mentioned dimension, a new dimension is now clear, that of providing support (supportive role). Teachers support and help learners in matters that affect the learning process and that may not be related to it. They cultivate a good relationship with them, maintain regular communication, support them, and encourage them to continue their effort. Empathy, empathetic listening and communicating empathy are crucial for their supportive role.

For this communication with learners to be effective, the roles between teachers and learners must remain distinct. Teachers should also develop skills that will help them manage their relationship with others as well as themselves.

The administrative dimension of the teachers' role is complemented by the facilitative dimension, since teachers, in addition to psychological support, provide help, advice, information and are the intermediate link between the educational institution and the learners.

Furthermore, to be an efficient teacher, one should be characterized by components such as integrity, adaptability, flexibility, cordiality, enthusiasm, humor, organizational and technological communication and interactions skills, fair judgment, deep knowledge of his subject and, of course, one should be an inspiration for learners (Παπαδημητρίου 2014, p. 109-118 & Παπαδημητρίου 2015, *passim*).

4. Conclusions

Distance education is defined by the distance of space or time between teacher and learner and requires specially designed educational material, while e-learning and online education are characterized using digital technology as resource and form of communication (Σοφός et al. 2015, p. 22).

This paper tried to focus on the investigation of the impact of distance education in the conventional one, with a view to upgrading the changing role of teachers. By presenting the main characteristics of these forms of education, this study aimed to highlight the new and always changing role of teachers. It pointed out that the integration of online and distance learning methods in the traditional educational practices was so effective that catalyzed the conventional role of teachers.

Teachers are the key to the future of education and their role is significant. Considering the elements that differentiate online-distance learning from the traditional one and the catalyzed impact of the first on the second one, this paper described these new characteristics of teachers by emphasizing the numerous roles they have adopted: the instructional role, the supportive role, the administrative role and the facilitative role.

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