



Distance Education and "Social Convergence"

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The rapid development of distance learning technologies forms the basis of the education revolution that we are living in now. Like all revolutions, the education revolution will provide solutions to many problems, but it will also create new issues that the world will be concerned with addressing. It has been proven that distance education is an appropriate model for maintaining the continuity of the educational process during crises that cause the closure of educational institutions, such as health crises, natural disasters, and armed conflicts. But will the distance education model remain the only option for follow-up after crises end and life returns to normal?

In light of imposing "social distancing" measures to contain the Coronavirus pandemic since February, people were forced to engage with the distance education process. Thus, education personnel realized the advantages and capabilities of e-learning as well as the capabilities available to develop and benefit from it in improving future education outcomes. Indeed, e-learning still provides solutions to many problems, especially related to technology development to serve and enrich the educational process. This includes open source platforms, search engines, educational content software, digital evaluations, and electronic communication tools that stimulate interaction between all parties in the education process.

The changing lifestyle in the shadow of the Coronavirus pandemic, which depends on the necessity of "social distancing", has led to a heavy reliance on the use of modern technology means to compensate for this divergence. Technology has also continued to offer solutions in different areas of life. In addition to distance education, the importance of remote communication has increased in all areas: such as shopping, government, and banking transactions as well as hosting business, academic, and cultural meetings to maintain contact between relatives and friends in their daily conversations. Indeed daily life is now regulated according to the principle of remote communication, which has proved its usefulness in light of the state of urgency that has afflicted the world today. But the central question that comes up in this context does not revolve around whether this type of communication will endure after this current state of necessity, because this is a reality that has become taken for granted, but rather about the need to pay attention to the "side effects" that will come up and address these negative aspects. The central question that imposes itself in this context revolves around whether "social distancing" will remain the dominant and preferred pattern for future life, or whether "social convergence" will remain the essential basis for collective human life. The answer to this central question will be important for defining future education structures and models, in addition to other vital matters.

In the field of education, discussions are taking place about two trends regarding possible models for implementation once the crisis ends. The first trend adopts an integrated education model that takes advantage of the benefits of face-to-face and distance education to achieve the highest benefits from these two systems and to bridge the gaps in each. In fact, some universities and schools have begun

planning for blended education, specifying the days of the week when distance education will be used, and the days when learning will be held face-to-face in response to the requirements of applied sciences and social activities, to name a few. The second trend is fully embracing the distance learning model and is pushing its supporters with all their might to promote it. This trend includes believers from those who specialize in open education and who have experience in information technology and digitization techniques, as well as profitable companies that found an opportunity to achieve abundant profit by competing to produce and market all of its technologies and tools. Regardless of motivation, and based on the fact that man is a social being, of course, this trend must provide solutions for how to use distance education to meet the human needs of communication in terms of "social convergence" which in turn constitutes the basis of formation, its means, and its goal in the development of man and society. The means of distance education enrich the social and political upbringing process, but they do not replace formal face-to-face education, in both its formal and informal aspects.

The process of raising children begins at home and is reinforced in school through educational curricula, students' discussions with each other, their interaction with their teachers in the halls and playgrounds, and through face-to-face extra-curricular activities such as sports, cultural clubs, and friendship groups. The same applies to universities, as students harness all their spaces, such as halls, theaters, stadiums, libraries, museums, and cafes, to engage in dialogues and competitions that refine the opinions and actions of their young people to help define their directions, form their ideals and personalities, and enhance their positive values. It also provides them with opportunities to meet leaders from various sectors and get to know them in political and social symposia, also allowing them to form unions and practice the democratic process in preparing electoral programs, running, voting, and competing for their leadership positions. In educational institutions, students are impacted by teachers and by interacting with their community, through which a value system is formed. Within the framework of "social convergence", face-to-face education paves the way for students to come into contact with social groups.

During the back and forth commute to and from their educational institution, students notice how car dealerships interact with customers, how the police deal with people, they learn how to cross the street safely, the etiquette of conversation, the principles of ethics and social responsibility, and realize the meaning of volunteerism and the importance of humanitarian work. This includes helping the less fortunate. Because of the importance of all of the above, those who are hasty to adopt distance education completely are expected to answer the following questions: How will distance education solve issues related to social life that are linked to social and political formation and are closely related to face-to-face communication within educational institutions? And how will the individual acquire the values and skills of socializing? Will solutions focus on changing education goals to focus on quantity by increasing enrollment ratios and providing access to knowledge-only opportunities, or will it include interest in providing a quality, integrated education? Will solutions focus on providing students with knowledge and training them only in job-friendly skills, or will they stick to the process of education that develops man and society? Will this trend call for separating education from pure education and placing its burden on comprehensive civil society institutions or cultural clubs and partisan frameworks, or will it choose to distribute responsibilities between them in a way that achieves harmony and complementarity?

During the shutdown, online distance learning provided partial solutions to mitigate the effects of social distancing. The solutions were by publishing written instructions, videos, and simulation programs that trained all parties in organizing time, discipline, focus, and teamwork remotely. It taught them ways to strike a balance between learning and recreation as well as communicating with friends through chat rooms. But this training remained incomplete for children and adults alike, eager to meet in cafes, clubs, and the corridors of schools and universities.

Schools and universities will open their doors at some point, and those responsible for education are expected to make decisions about the educational model that best suits the needs of their students, taking advantage of the opportunity to address the shortcomings of traditional education, as well as remote e-learning, and providing creative solutions to serve the goals of the development of their countries and society. Decision-making needs a lot of scrutiny, reflection, and review of the models used before and through the plight of Coronavirus, to take lessons from and advantage of the ongoing dialogues about the future of education and its current revolution, which is based on the steady acceleration in the use of technologies that have pushed distance education to center stage. It is worth noting, if the distance education model is increasingly adopted, there should be a need to provide solutions that address the fundamental problem of its failure to address social aspects, which are integral components of the educational process.