

HOW COVID-19 IS RESHAPING TEACHING AND LEARNING: A PERSPECTIVE FROM KHAZAR UNIVERSITY

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Newsletter to the attention of our readers.*



Over the past decades, we have witnessed that exceptional technological innovation has influenced educational institutions in the pedagogical design of teaching and learning processes. Currently, the role of ICT in education is potentially transformative. Due to the lockdown caused by COVID-19, education is moving fully online. The current situation has raised many questions about modes of education and the challenges associated with providing a prompt response.

Most universities across the globe are largely using a Learning Management System (LMS). LMS, as it is defined by McGill & Klobas (2009), facilitates eLearning, as it can store and disseminate educational materials as well as provide a platform for all educational actors to communicate within the context of teaching and learning. LMS in Azerbaijani Universities are an exception rather than a norm. An integrated Personal Learning Environment (PLE) - a system that allows students to take control of their own learning environment - is even rarer. What is more, few universities have been utilising LMS for blended learning purposes. Although some projects were implemented to improve blended learning, there is still a need to enhance it further. For instance, the ERASMUS + KA2 CBHE project on Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Azerbaijani Universities (PETRA) has trained hundreds of instructors to use the Moodle platform to strengthen their teaching. As a result of this project, many universities in Azerbaijan were relatively ready to take on online teaching and were able to rapidly transfer to

online teaching and learning during the outbreak.

All universities are concerned to keep students engaged in learning during the lockdown period. In Azerbaijan, one of the most affordable and quick solutions was to adopt MS Teams, as it was recommended by the Ministry of Education of the Azerbaijan Republic. Universities were given a short time period to prepare. At Khazar University, for example, all teachers and instructors were provided online tutoring on using the platform effectively. Currently, over 90% of classes are being taught with MS Teams. Some exceptions include those teachers who are using differ types of socialisation software to communicate with students. This includes the Moodle platform, Zoom and Facebook. The lockdown period has pushed instructors to use this opportunity to excel in their techno-pedagogical skills. They now are quickly progressing with newly acquired digital competence.

Reshaping learning

The main disadvantage of the virus outbreak is that it has caused social isolation. The evidence suggests that socialisation is conceived as 'fundamental to cognition' (O'Sullivan, Krewer and Frankl, 2017). From a social learning theory perspective, we develop our complex skills by socialisation and interaction (Ala-Mutka et al., 2008). The situation of social isolation has progressively turned students into self-regulated learners. However, because learning is a social process (Vygotsky, 1978), students ideally learn

not only from an instructor but also from their peers. Following the perspectives of constructivist and sociocultural theorists, combining formal and informal types of learning will contribute to better student engagement. Despite its negative consequences, the lockdown can be used to effectively combine formal and informal learning strategies by integrating LMS with socialisation software to engage students in their studies. This takes a concerted approach, however, guided by institutional policies, student services and continued teaching training.

Student engagement and interaction will highly depend on the quality of an instructor and to what extent an instructor is capable of providing guidance for students to use technologies for their informal learning (Cigognini et al., 2011). The main challenge faced by instructors is to engage demotivated and disengaged students, to the extent possible. Currently, universities are responsible for ensuring that their academic staff are 'competent in communication and engaging students' (Isaeva et al., 2020). Many questions remain unanswered and need further investigation: How prepared are teachers to provide quality online teaching? To what extent do they understand how students

navigate technology? What about students who needs support in learning online? Will this lead to an increased dropout rate? What else should universities do to motivate students to continue their online learning?

Lockdown has generated emotional, psychological, and mental stress for all actors in the education process. Uncertainty is growing every day. But one thing remains clear: educational institutions should reconsider their strategy to be better prepared for uncertain situations. This must include:

Recognising the unprecedented role of ICT in education and what it requires to implement at a massive scale;

Designing Personal Learning Environments to provide students with an opportunity to combine formal and informal types of learning;

Investing in developing the digital competence of teaching staff.

Educational institutions need to recognise the necessity to reshape modes of teaching and learning and immediately respond to the challenges raised by this situation so as to continue to provide meaningful and accessible learning opportunities.

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