Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 and E-Learning on Learner Social Isolation: The Case of First-Year Students at Teacher Training College, (ENSB), Algiers

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of universities and colleges around the world, in hope that social distancing could help to reduce total deaths from the disease. The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of social distancing and e-Learning on the mental health of the learners**.** The study relies on a sample of 160 students enrolled at ENSB for their first year in the English department**.** The first part of the article will give a brief introduction of the medical literature on COVID-19 and the second part will consider the implementation of e-Learning in education. The third section will discuss the dangers and risks of social isolation drawing on the feedback of first-year students of English at ENBS.

Keywords: COVID-19; E-Learning; face-to-face learning; social distancing; social isolation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic spread quickly from its first emergence to a truly global phenomenon. It has caused profound changes in interaction and organization of the social life of individuals. The education sector has not been immune. While young people appear to be at a lower mortality risk category compared to adults, pandemic measures such as 'social distancing' or 'physical distancing' have attempted to reduce contact among people, and thereby minimize transmission that could develop quickly in dense social networks like campus and university. Therefore, keeping students off campus and moving teaching online, is considered vital by local authorities. Thus, public health officials largely agree that the general threat of COVID-19 is best fought with measures of social distancing

I. COVID-19 and E-LEARNING

1. Medical Literature on COVID-19: A brief introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic grew quickly from its first emergence to a truly global phenomenon. A brief review of the rise of the virus provides context. The first reported date of the illness for COVID-19 was December 1, 2019, and the first hospital intake date was December 16, 2019 (Huang et al., 2020, P. 499). By December 30, 2019, a cluster of pneumonia patients in Wuhan, China was reported to the World Heath Organization's Beijing office (Guerner, 2020, P. 420). Clinical indications indicated a shared viral strain of pneumonia, which was named 2019-nCoV, or 1019 novel coronavirus (Huang et al., 2020, p. 497). Exactly one month after the viral pneumonia cluster was recognized -just after two months after the first symptoms ever caused by the virus- the World Health Organization declared a Public Health emergency of International Concern (Lai et al., 2020, p. 12), and on March 11, 2020, a COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The rapidity of the spread can be understood by characteristics of the virus itself.
Community transmission – that is, the spread of a virus within a certain region – is targeted through programs of social distancing. By slowing the rate of spread with the community, these policies help keep infection rate at manageable level withing existing healthcare infrastructure, and allow research on treatment methods to progress so that evidence-based treatments can be applied to individuals who fall ill.

2. E-Learning
The response to the spread of the COVID-19 consists of 'E-Learning'. This marks the rapid transition of face-face classes to online learning systems.

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Face-to-face schooling is constructed as a specific threat from which the community must be protected, and E-Learning is the security measure proposed to protect the community. Public health officials warn about the dangers of community transmission. Thus, the widespread adoption of e-Learning under COVID-19 becomes a pathway to a new normal.

When online classes first began students are thrilled to use the laptop. Months after, the thrill has diminished and they are anxious by the prospect of sitting in front of the laptop every morning. Considering the school routine on line, the interaction between students and teachers seems dull and all the students want is a chance to return to the campus. There seems to be a fatigue setting in among students after taking online classes for months. Students want to go back to school, meet their friends. Hence, parents fear that their children are becoming asocial, and getting increasingly hooked to their gadgets, in the absence of face-to-face interactions. At first, when we start to use internet it seems one of the greatest language teaching materials ever created.

However, psychologists argue that in addition to COVID-19 being framed as a general threat, social isolation was also presented as a threat. Psychological science tells us that social context, interpersonal relationships, and emotional wellbeing are important to student learning. Connectedness and belonging, in contrast to social isolation, are essential for academic success and mental health.

It is particularly difficult to foster students' personal relationships and social -emotional development while practicing physical distancing. Having limited access to peers and classmates can affect students' emotional well-being, which can, in turn, affect their educational performance, learning and development. As such, the following principles constitute the major part of the teaching-learning process:

1. Learning is situated within multiple social contexts.
2. Interpersonal relationships and communication are critical to both the teaching-learning process and the socio-emotional development of students.
3. Emotional well-being influences educational performance, learning and development.
3. Second and foreign language teaching emphasize the importance of target-language interaction among students. (ETF1991, P.12.)

With the absence of these principles, the impact of the COVI-19 pandemic is drastically changing the lives of people and the lives of students. Schools and universities have closed, exams and events cancelled, socializing with friends and wider family is highly discouraged. Living under such circumstances can be tough and hard for students for their social, physical and mental health.

When students believe that relationships exist among classmates, they feel connected. Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 created a 'new normal' of social distancing. As
a result of these measures, students are experiencing an extended period of social isolation that may have profound long-term impacts. Specifically, the mental and physical toll of prolonged periods without satisfying relationships or human contact is linked to the development of social isolation risks.

3. Social Isolation Risks:
Here, it is worth identifying the social isolation risks. The following are the physical and emotional signs of social isolation:

-   Anxiety and depression
Just as early loneliness can lead to anxiety in later life, loneliness is also associated with present feelings of sadness and anxiety.
- **Low self-esteem**

Just as strong peer relations correlate positively with self(worth, many isolated students suffer from low self-esteem.
- **Lack of sleep**

Experts link loneliness with sleep disturbances and trouble falling asleep.
- **Somatic symptoms**

Loneliness in students is strongly associated with stomachaches and headaches.
- **Substance use and abuse**

Students substance use (Cigarettes, illicit drugs, etc.) positively correlates with social isolation, perhaps due to the perceived need to self-medicate or the desire for social acceptance.
In fact, social isolation in young people can lead to immediate negative mental health outcomes with potentially severe consequences in life later.

II. Mitigating the Impact of Learner Social Isolation
Preparing for the long-term impacts of C0VID-19 on young learners is the duty of the local authorities. We need to be prepared for the impacts that social distancing has on learner who suffer from social isolation.
Apart from the obvious impacts on health and the economy, COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus some of the longstanding inequalities that exist within our society. Extra planning is needed to support and sustain the most vulnerable students. One way to address this is to include experts of all types and students themselves in the national COVID-19 Commission.

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Beside the fear of the new system of learning, the biggest obstacle to online education, would be a lack of access to the Internet. And there are still Algerian families that don't have a computer that can handle the needed software. Many families also lack the high-speed internet that would give students stable access to virtual classrooms. Such limitations can make online learning seem impossible, which automatically lead to stressful situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a 'tragedy'. And the call for social distancing has created an extremely challenging environment for students, parents, and their teachers. However, we believe online learning will also be normal. With this new learning system, we recognize the inequalities present in online learning. Students from wealthy socio-economic backgrounds are at advantage not just in terms of access to technology, but also other resources. Family homes may need to accommodate a number of students, each with their own specific study requirements. Parents will need to be proficient at using computers and laptops, and all houses throughout cities, towns and rural/ remote areas in Algeria will need a stable internet connection. Critically, students will need the ability to adequately communicate their needs through written form via e-mail. This might be a problem for students whose numeracy and literacy levels are low, and for teachers unused to expressing more complex concepts and interpreting their students' needs through written communication only.

Indeed, it's not just about having the tools, it's the cultural and social context too. Access to social and cultural resources will also set people apart. The children of professional, educated parent fluent in English will undoubtedly fare and succeed better than those from households experiencing some level of disadvantage. Some examples of disadvantage include students with parents whose education level doesn't meet the basic needs of the curriculum or are simply illiterate.

For learners in virtual learning models, educational disparities may widen further. According to statistics this technological 'homework gap' affects our students. Drawing on the feedback of students, I argue that Algerian young students need face-to-face learning. We need to be prepared for the impact that social distancing has on those who require face-to-face support and whose aim is to get up and show up to school. Students are reluctant to learning via Internet. They want to discover life in the campus. When I asked first-year students about their preference of e-Learning or face-to-face, I got the following responses, bearing in mind that I reported their very words. Here are some replies from students enrolled in the first year at ENSB:

'In my opinion, distance of learning in Algeria is not solution, because not al student of Algeria have internet in poor area, and also the student don't interested to continue their studies.

Saida,

17. Oran

'Due to the pandemic of covid19, many student have to study online, but its not such a great solution, because it may impact badly by making student more lazier'

Meriem,

18. Tizi-ouzou

'the pandemic of covid-19 makes of us sick and afraid, despite of being safe in our homes, but we still not good when we try to study thrugh the internet or we can say studying on-line. For example, about me, Ican never understand my lessons if I can't meet my teachers of school.'

Ibtissem,

19. Ain defla.'

'The student will not be comfortable because sometimes the connection is not good. He will not be concentrated 100% to his lessons.Also not all students have connection at home.
The student could enter another sites and they will not focus on their studies. The teacher as wel will find some problems ike not al the students are interested to what he sends or what he is talking about.'

Sarah,

18. Tissemsit.

For me using the internet is harmful, and I think it is not a good idea because the people don't have the money to pay the internet.

Mouna,19 Chlef.

'To a student in his first year in university don't know about it. I want to say it's difficult to study by this way firstly a lot of students don't have computers secondey the wifi problem in Algeria is another problem.'

Sarah,

17. Tipaza.

'I find that it's difficult for students to stay at home to learn and practice because it has bad effects on tudents' heath if they stay from the breaking of the day to the middle of the night, therefore students become angry, furious.'

Kamelia,

17; Tlemcen.

'I prefer learning face-to-face because I afraid to be alone and can concentrate more with teacher.'

Samah, 17. Algiers.

'I prefer face-to-face learning because when someone has a question he will directey ask it also students may have trouble with e-learning of wifi or noise at somewhere. Face-to-face learning helps students to not be afraid and learn more quickly.'

Akram, 17; Boumerdes.

From the above statements, students claim their need for face-to-face classes and showed their distress and fear of the online learning. They affirm their unreadiness and unwillingness to study exclusively online.

As teachers of English, we are all well aware of the all-important role of authentic-like discourse and materials in communicative language teaching. It is the argument here that language learner in the classroom would benefit from the contextualization of second-language teaching and from the adaptation, for classroom use, of naturally occurring language-learning situations. (Joshua A. Fishman, 1976, p. 43.)

Consequently, Counselors should be leveraged to provide individualized attention and context-specific strategies to adapt to the Algerian social context and cater for the needs and interests young students more particularly. Social connectedness is of vital importance in the life of students. According to Hutchison,

" The suggestion is that the brain is physically affected by the presence or absence of attachment. Gerhardt concludes that without emotional bonding with an adult, the orbitofrontal cortex in the brain that allows social relationships to develop) cannot develop properly." (2008, p.122)

The need for a teacher and the classroom is required for the young student. Hence, it is imperative to adapt the presential class to the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following are some strategies to implement in the class to avoid social isolation and promote the social-emotional wellbeing:

- **Small groups**

Small group settings have long been observed to aid in learning and social wellbeing, making them a valuable tool when dealing with students of all ages.

- **Reflection**

Targeted social practices have been demonstrated to facilitate mutual respect, peer collaboration, and positive relationships. One common example of this is 'Class Meetings', which students and teachers discuss classroom issues in a supportive context**.**

- **Social Engagement**

Some experts suggest that organizing initiatives such as lunchtime, mix-ups, where students are encouraged to make new friends during lunch periods, are beneficial due to their alleviation of major stress-points.

- **Peer Initiatives and Interventions**

Peer-mediated intervention has been established as a useful tool for increasing social interaction and academic performance in students. Properly implemented, these could play a wider role in addressing social isolation.

CONCLUSION

As we undergo these educational changes in Algeria, it is important to point out that the dramatic shift from face-to-face approach in teaching to online system of teaching that also takes into consideration the acquisition of academic skills and the use of the internet as a tool for learning may become overwhelming for most teachers. This is especially true in light of the fact that the majority of the teachers have not undergone the kind of training required to make a positive change out of these innovations. Even though these changes were meant to be gradual, implementation has already started and may find most teachers willing but unprepared. Let alone the students who are left with a huge feeling of anxiety and stress. Keeping students away from class is not an alternative to the crisis of the COVI-19. It is imperative to find an emergency pathway which consists of inviting students to school but with reducing both the groups and the timing. We can then save their mental and physical health

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