3 ways the coronavirus pandemic could reshape education

A student attends an online class at home as students' return to school has been delayed due to the novel coronavirus outbreak, in Fuyang, Anhui province, China March 2, 2020.
Image: REUTERS/China Daily CDIC
13 Mar 2020

1. **Gloria Tam** Associate Dean of Corporate and Lifelong Learning, Minerva Project
2. **Diana El-Azar** Senior Director, Strategic Communications and Market Development, Minerva Project

The World Economic Forum COVID Action Platform

More on the agenda

- The coronavirus pandemic has changed how millions around the globe are educated.

- New solutions for education could bring much needed innovation.

- Given the digital divide, new shifts in education approaches could widen equality gaps.

In a matter of weeks, coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed how students are educated around the world. Those changes give us a

glimpse at how education could change for the better - and the worse - in the long term.

With the coronavirus spreading rapidly across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States, countries have taken swift and decisive actions to mitigate the development of a full-blown pandemic. In the past two weeks, there have been multiple announcements suspending attendance at schools and universities. As of March 13, the OECD estimated that over 421 million children are affected due to school closures announced or implemented in 39 countries. In addition, another 22 countries have announced partial "localized" closures.

These risk-control decisions have led millions of students into temporary 'home-schooling' situations, especially in some of the most heavily impacted countries, like China, South Korea, Italy, and Iran. These changes have certainly caused a degree of inconvenience, but they have also prompted new examples of educational innovation. Although it is too early to judge how reactions to COVID-19 will affect education systems around the world, there are signs suggesting that it could have a lasting impact on the trajectory of learning innovation and digitization. Below, we follow three trends that could hint at future transformations:

1. Education - nudged and pushed to change - could lead to surprising innovations

The slow pace of change in academic institutions globally is lamentable, with centuries-old, lecture-based approaches to teaching, entrenched institutional biases, and outmoded classrooms. However, COVID-19 has become a catalyst for educational institutions worldwide to search for innovative solutions in a relatively short period of time.

To help slow the virus' spread, students in Hong Kong started to learning at home, in February, via interactive apps. In China, 120 million Chinese got access to learning material through live television broadcasts.

Other simpler - yet no less creative - solutions were implemented around the globe. In one Nigerian school, standard asynchronous online learning tools (such as reading material via Google Classroom), were augmented with synchronous face-to-face video instruction, to help preempt school closures.

Similarly, students at one school in Lebanon began leveraging online learning, even for subjects such as physical education. Students shot

and sent over their own videos of athletic training and sports to their teachers as "homework," pushing students to learn new digital skills. One student's parent remarked, "while the sports exercise took a few minutes, my son spent three hours shooting, editing and sending the video in the right format to his teacher."

With 5G technology becoming more prevalent in countries such as China, US and Japan, we will see learners and solution providers truly embracing the 'learning anywhere, anytime' concept of digital education in a range of formats. Traditional in-person classroom learning will be complemented with new learning modalities - from live broadcasts to 'educational influencers' to virtual reality experiences. Learning could become a habit that is integrated into daily routines - a true lifestyle.

2. Public-private educational partnerships could grow in importance

In just the past few weeks, we have seen learning consortiums and coalitions taking shape, with diverse stakeholders - including governments, publishers, education professionals, technology providers, and telecom network operators - coming together to utilize digital platforms as a temporary solution to the crisis. In emerging countries where education has predominantly been provided by the government, this could become a prevalent and consequential trend to future education.

In China, the Ministry of Education has assembled a group of diverse constituents to develop a new cloud-based, online learning and broadcasting platform as well as to upgrade a suite of education infrastructure, led by the Education Ministry and Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

Similarly, the Hong Kong-based readtogether.hk forum (China Daily video here) is a consortium of over 60 educational organizations, publishers, media, and entertainment industry professionals, providing more than 900 educational assets, including videos, book chapters, assessment tools, and counseling services for free. The consortium's intention is to continue using and maintaining the platform even after COVID-19 has been contained.

Through examples like these, it is evident that educational innovation is receiving attention beyond the typical government-funded or non-profit-backed social project. In the past decade, we have already seen far greater interest, and investment, coming from the private sector in education solutions and innovation. From Microsoft and Google in the

U.S. to Samsung in Korea to Tencent, Ping An, and Alibaba in China, corporations are awakening to the strategic imperative of an educated populace. While most initiatives to date have been limited in scope, and relatively isolated, the pandemic could pave the way for much larger-scale, cross-industry coalitions to be formed around a common educational goal.**3. The digital divide could widen**

Most schools in affected areas are finding stop-gap solutions to continue teaching, but the quality of learning is heavily dependent on the level and quality of digital access. After all, only around [60% of the globe's population is online](). While virtual classes on personal tablets may be the norm in Hong Kong, for example, many students in less developed economies rely on lessons and assignments sent via WhatsApp or email.

Moreover, the less affluent and digitally savvy individual families are, the further their students are left behind. When classes transition online, these children lose out because of the cost of digital devices and data plans.

Unless access costs decrease and quality of access increase in all countries, the gap in education quality, and thus socioeconomic equality will be further exacerbated. The digital divide could become more extreme if educational access is dictated by access to the latest technologies.

"Resilience must be built into our educational systems"
—Gloria Tam & Diana El-Azar, Minerva Project

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of building resilience to face various threats, from pandemic disease to extremist violence to climate insecurity, and even, yes, rapid technological change. The pandemic is also an opportunity to remind ourselves of the skills students need in this unpredictable world such as informed decision making, creative problem solving, and perhaps above all, adaptability. To ensure those skills remain a priority for all students, resilience must be built into our educational systems as well.