SWITCHING TO ONLINE TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract:
Apart from its health, social and economic impact, the recent pandemic has also influenced education all over the world. Students as well as teachers face numerous challenges in the switch from face-to-face to online lessons. On the one hand, they are all supposed to be able to use different tools and platforms, such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Mentimeter, Moodle, and so forth. Moreover, teachers have to change their teaching methods and adapt their courses to a completely different environment which sometimes might fail due numerous reasons such as insufficient technical knowledge or even worse to simple bad internet connection or lack of electricity.

Key words: online teaching, pandemic, platforms, applications

JEL classification: I10

1.   GENERAL VIEW

The first online course with open access, called Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) was created in 2008 by Dave Cormier from Prince Edward Island University. Later, other universities such as Stanford in 2011, and Harvard in 2012 started to offer open online classes. In the last decade, online courses have played an increasing role in teaching. Educators initially had to redefine their role, as online courses were more student-centered than the traditional face-to-face, teacher-centered classes.[1] Moreover, educators had to change their teaching methods, instruments and way of interaction with students.

In 2020, due to COVID-19 pandemic situation and the closing of schools and universities, online classes resulted to be the only way of continuing the educational process.

The Decree no 195 of 16th March 2020 regarding the emergency situation on Romanian territory, published in the Official Gazette no 212 of 16th March 2020, represented a crucial moment for teachers, pupils, students and parents. Computer

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[1]Evrim, B., Correia A., & Thompson, A. (2011). *Transforming online teaching practice: critical analysis of the literature on the roles and competencies of online teachers. Distance Education, 32* (3), p. 421-439.
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literacy of teachers, the necessary technical assistance provided by parents to their children, as well as equipment such as computers, tablets, phones, and internet access have become only some of the main concerns of the educational process.

On the one hand, some teachers were not very good with technology or worried they might not adapt their teaching methods to online classes, they might not attract their students or keep them interested and motivated.

On the other hand, parents faced apart from technical worries (computer literacy), financial worries (the necessity of an available computer or tablet for their children, internet access) and also professional related issues (elementary children for instance needed permanent technical assistance during classes which definitely took part during the working time of their parents).

Last but not least, children as well as students faced a very new teaching method, which meant staying at home, without direct interaction, with lots of projects and demands, with numerous wrongly adapted teaching methods, as well as a very strange and new way of evaluation and examination.

For a short period of time, the email, WhatsApp and Facebook played an important part in the educational process and step by step, they were replaced by numerous platforms and applications, most of them becoming free due to pandemic. Many private institutions, associations and universities started providing free or very cheap courses for the use of different platforms and apps, thus responding to a huge necessity of teachers, trainers and parents.

2. PLATFORMS AND APPLICATIONS

Some of the most used platforms and applications in the educational process during the pandemic are going to be described below. Due to the great amount of such platforms, the description bellow provides the personal insights of the authors in relation to their use, availability and necessity. There is no purpose in the description to identify the best or worst platform, each and every one serving specific demands and necessities, being useful for specific subject matters, teachers, teaching methods, students, ages, levels, specializations, etc. There is also a random order in their presentation with no intention of full listing or technical claims. The illustration should be regarded as a brief list of online instruments which might result useful to teachers through simple descriptions, suggestions and hints. Some of the platforms can be used for real time interactions, for online collaborative purposes, as well as for dynamic reasons.

Zoom.us[2] is one of the most used worldwide platforms. It provides an easy access based on free registration, initially with 40 minutes sessions with 100 participants. During the pandemic Zoom raised the 40 minutes limitation for schools in the whole world. Teachers therefore can use their professional email to launch zoom meetings with no time limitations from their computers, tablets or phones using the camera and the audio function. As a next step, teachers invite their students from the *Participants* section at the bottom of the page. The invitation can be sent directly through email or can be copied on other chats. Students do not have to create their own zoom account; they can just take part in the meeting with the link received from the teacher, with *open zoom* and joining with the camera and audio function.

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[2] http://zoom.us.

Some of the useful features of zoom are the *Schedule meetings* (with a name, a short description, date, period of time and a password), *Waiting rooms, Breakout rooms* (for small group or pair activities), *Share screen* (for the host but also for the participants), *Record, Reactions, Whiteboard,* as well as the possibility to share documents and to chat. Apart from the free version, Zoom also provides numerous features, such as Social Media Streaming, Cloud Recording, Recording Transcripts, which are available on yearly paid license.

Moodle.org is a strong open-source learning platform, "the world's most popular learning management system, used by more than 60% of all higher education in the world" as stated in the opening page[3]. Generally purchased by institutions and installed by administrators on the institutional servers, it can be installed by teachers as course creators and students as users through a code. It provides numerous drag-and-drop tools, and it is an extremely useful resource, translated into more than 95 languages. Some of its features are the following *forum, content sections* with resources (documents, directories, links) and activities (tests, questionnaires), *news, events, course administration,* etc.

Google meet[4] is another highly used video-communication platform developed by Google, with easy access based on email registration or a Google account. The platform does not have to be downloaded, and a new meeting can be initiated just by selecting the option to schedule or start an immediate meeting. The teacher is asked to let the application use the camera and microphone and then to invite the participants. Similarly, students do not have to download the application, they just have to accept the invitation and to allow the use of their camera and microphone. Meetings with up to 100 participants are free for one hour. It provides similar functions to those of Zoom such as: *Share Screen, Record, Chat, Whiteboard,* as well as *English subtitles.* For paid variants the duration of meetings can reach 300 hours and the number of participants 250. There are only 16 participants visible at the same time on the screen.

Google Classroom[5] is also part of the Google Suite for Education, as Google Meet, used for online collaborative purposes. It requires a personal Gmail account or the free enrollment of the school. Teachers can create different virtual classes using the plus sign and giving it a name, a description and a room. Students can access the class either through the email invitation from the teacher or logging in with the code. The platform is extremely useful for an accurate evidence of documents, papers, assignments, projects, homework, tests or different announcements and marks. The *create* function allows teachers to send their students materials, requests, questions, homework or tests. They can also establish different deadlines for each assignment, make suggestions, evaluate and give marks. Students on the other hand, can easily send their homework or tests and can post questions. The platform also allows collaborative teaching as one or more teachers can be involved in the virtual teaching process.

Edmondo[6] is one of the biggest educational social networks in the world, providing collaboration and coaching to teachers, students and parents. The platform can be freely reached from any computer, tablet and phone, without any download. It is a teacher centered platform, and thus the teacher has to have an account, based on email.

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[3] https://moodle.org.
[4] https://meet.google.com.
[5] https://classroom.google.com.
[6] https://new.edmodo.com.

Then a class can be created, stating its name, a short description, the grade of the students, the subject matter, etc. The class once created, students or other teachers can be invited with an email, the access code or creating accounts in advance for them. Some of the features of the platform are the following *Library* which allows teachers to upload different documents, *Assignment* where there is the possibility to edit and attach a file, *Quizz* for evaluations, where different tests can be created, *Grades* with the activity, homework and result of each student, *Poll* which allows students to vote and shows a final percentage, and *Badges* showing the level reached by each student or being used as rewards for their activities and results. Parents can also have limited access to some activities on the platform through the access code.

Mentimeter[7] is an interactive platform, successfully used during presentations for real time questionnaires and questions. It can be accessed through a free account on mentimeter.com, where questions with only one correct answer can be prepared. When the test is created, mentimeter gives it a code. Students introduce the provided code on www.mentimeter.com and answer the question on their phone, tablet or computer. The answers immediately show up of the screen of the teacher, who thus has a fast overview of the status of the so far provided information. Given its interactive, playful and fast use, the interest of listeners, mainly of students, generally increases, avoiding thus long, one-sided boring descriptions.

Kahoot[8] is a platform which can be used for collaboration, formative assessment and feedback. Teachers can register with a free account and immediately create appealing tests. The traditional paper based simply written test can be replaced by colourful tests with pictures, images, and animated GIFs. Once created, there is a code that students have to introduce in the downloaded platform on their computer, tablet or phone. Such tests stimulate the playful character of students as well as their competitional spirit. At the end of the test, the teacher gets an analysis of their results and answers.

Wordwall[9] is an application used to create different games in order to support the learning process with an attractive and playful approach. With a free account, teachers can create different games based on given templates. They have to select a template and build up the game. The game assigned to students in wordwall can be easily found on the platform and the answers are registered and directed to the teacher.

Socrative[10] is a fun and effective app which can be easily accessed by teachers through free email registration. The teacher gets a code and can create attractive tests, quizzes and polls which can be used during the class and accessed by students based on the provided code.

ISLCollective[11] is another useful platform with free access through registration. There are numerous features provided by the platform such as *Worksheets*, *PowerPoint* and *Video lessons*. It is an extremely rich resource for language teachers with multiple grammar and vocabulary theoretical and exercise templates, divided according to levels of language, age of students and type of lesson. Moreover, lessons can be created by teachers with immediately selected Youtube videos that can be specially designed with questions or word filling exercises according to the necessities. After a preview of the

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[7] https://www.mentimeter.com.
[8] https://kahoot.com.
[9] https://wordwall.net.
[10] https://www.socrative.com.
[11] https://en.islcollective.com

created video exercise, the teacher can assign it to other participants who are supposed to register as students and use the provided code.

Liveworksheets[12] is another platform that can be effectively used for evaluation. After a free registration as a teacher, word or pdf files can be selected from the personal computer and uploaded in the platform. They can be edited and saved, thus getting a link which is sent to the students. After solving the test, students are asked if they want to send it to the teacher.

There are numerous other platforms and applications which have not been described above, such as Quizziz, Hot Patatoes, Livresq, Testmoz, LearninApps.org, Liveworksheets, Poll Everywhere, which definitely need attention.

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers are not supposed to know or use all the platforms and applications. They should be aware of their huge variety and choose those that better suit their personality, style of teaching, students, subject matter, and purposes. Lots of tutorials with accurate and practical examples are freely available on the internet.

A successful recipe could be a mix of a real time interactive platform (Zoom, Google Meet), with a collaborative one (Google Classroom, Edmondo) and one or two for assessments, questionnaires and games (Mentimeter, Kahoot, Wordwall). Too many platforms may have exactly the opposite effect. Instead of turning the class into an interactive and attractive one, it can result stressful to students from technical point of view.

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