Digital first or education first? Why we shouldn't let a virus undermine our educational artistry

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> "Improving education is not about improving teaching as a delivery system.
> Crucial is the desire of the artist to improve his or her art."
> Lawrence Stenhouse (1988[1])

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education around the world. With schools, colleges and universities being closed for considerable periods of time, and their re-opening still being controversial, much education has moved 'online.' In practice this means first and foremost that the interaction between teachers and students takes place via live video links, although it also involves pre-recorded lectures and presentations for students to watch at a time convenient to them, and the use of e-mail and other systems for written interaction. There are a number of different ways of referring to these approaches, including hybrid learning or hybrid education and blended learning or blended education, all highlighting the combination of different modes of 'delivery' and engagement.

Physical co-presence and the educator's toolkit

This, in itself, is not new. Homework, for example, is a case of a hybrid or blended educational approach, as is the combination of, say, lectures, group work and individual tasks. Education has, in a sense, always been hybrid, though what has changed over time are the modalities of hybridity and the technologies being used, bearing in mind that blackboards and textbooks are as much educational technology as tape-recorders and overhead projectors (Who remembers them?) and, more recently, computers. While for many educators the absence of opportunities for 'physical co-presence' (a slightly more accurate phrase than 'face-to-face') is the biggest change in the current situation, the Australian 'School of the Air'[2] is but one example of long-established practices of education at a distance.[3] So if there's anything new about the recent situation, it's not the hybridity of educational 'delivery,' nor the absence of physical co-presence, but the fact that physical co-presence has, for the moment, been taken out of the educator's toolkit.

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[1] Stenhouse, L. (1988), Artistry and teaching: The teacher as focus of research and development. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision 4*(1), 43-51.

[2] See, for example:
https://web.archive.org/web/20171223040511/http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/school-of-the-air

[3] See also: Lamb, T.R. (2012). The emergence of educational radio: Schools of the air. *TechTrends 56*(2), 9-10. DOI:10.1007/s11528-012-0557-5

Given that physical co-presence has become an immensely prominent aspect of educational practices around the world, and also a much cherished one, it is understandable that many educators feel inconvenienced about the situation – and the same maybe true for students, of course – although it says more about what we have become used to in our everyday educational practices, than that we can simply say that co-presence is good and education at a distance is bad, or at least worse than educational co-presence. Afterall, for a student used to education by radio, sitting in a classroom under the constant watch of a teacher may feel rather limiting and stifling, just as teaching at a distance and with time-delay may allow for emancipatory educational rhythms[4] that are difficult to achieve when teachers and students are constantly together in one space.

Digital first?

I am making these observations, because I have some concerns about the discourses and ensuing practices that have emerged recently in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. I remain hesitant about mentioning the pandemic, because I do not think that it is the only crisis that we should be concerned about, and by taking it as the main reference point for reflection and critique, there is a risk that we forget about the other urgencies that surround us.[5] Nonetheless, the pandemic has had a specific impact, and it is important to analysis what is going on here as well. The main concern I wish to express here, has to do with a phrase that has been around in educational circles for a while,[6] but which has become quite prominent, not just as a *characterisation* of education during the pandemic but also as an *imperative* for how educators should proceed. The phrase is 'digital first.'

To put it bluntly: I understand the phrase, yet at the very same time I do not want to understand it. I do think that the phrase needs to be unpicked and problematised. Let me make three points with reference to this task.

1. There is nothing digital about digital education

One thing I find remarkable in the discussion – and again, this has been going on well before the pandemic – is the use of the phrase 'digital education' as a shorthand for referring to education that makes use of computers and computer-based technology. The fact that most computers nowadays are digital and not analog, which basically means that they use binary number system and binary logic, does say very little if anything at all about what characterises computers and their use in education. There is nothing digital to experience when using a digital computer, and from that angle the term 'digital education' is as uninformative as, say,

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[4] See Alhadeff-Jones, M. (2018). *Time and the rhythms of emancipatory education: Rethinking the temporal complexity of self and society.* New York/London: Routledge.

[5] See Biesta, G.J.J. (in press/2020). Have we been paying attention? Educational anaesthetics in a time of crises. *Educational Philosophy and Theory.* [published online 12 July 2020] https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1792612]

[6] A google search for "digital first" + "education" on 19 August 2020 generated 2,150,000 results.

phrases like 'electric education' (given the fact that computers use electricity), or 'nuclear education' (given the fact that some of that electricity is generated by nuclear power plants), or 'Apple education' or 'Microsoft education' (given the fact that such computers may use software from those companies[7]).

Of course a slightly older phrase – technology-enhanced learning – is not any better in this respect, because one could argue (as I've alluded to above) that education has *always* used technologies. There is, in other words, always mediation going on in education; the only thing that changes over time are kind of technologies being utilised. The point that is important is that technologies are not neutral – they enable some things and make other things more difficult or even impossible – and in this regard it is of crucial importance to analyse the possibilities and limitations of differing educational technologies. But to suggest that the computer is the only technology that is worthy of the name 'technology' is a mistake.

The real question, therefore, is how the use of computers makes a difference and, first and foremost, how it makes a difference in the experience of teachers and students. To put it in more philosophical terms, the question is what the *phenomenological* differences are, and here I think that the term 'digital education' is misleading because the 'digital' is the very thing that is impossible to experience. I leave it to the reader to think further about this question. One thing I wish to highlight about 'digital education,' particularly in the form of education conducted via synchronous or asynchronous video-platforms, is that it is a 2-dimensional rather than a 3-dimensional experience. We see 2-D images of our students – and it's also significant that we often see an image of ourselves as well – and both the fact that we see *images* and that they are 2-D is very different from what we perceive during physical co-presence. The quality of sound and the more general soundscape of the classroom are also very different – and many of us have become quite proficient in self-muting and self-unmuting – as is the absence of smell.

Now, what the educational significance of these difference is, is a question for further discussion, but such a discussion needs to start with appropriate and nuanced descriptions of what we are encountering and experiencing, and the word 'digital' really has nothing to contribute to that task.

2. Questions of tools are secondary to questions of purpose

I have mentioned that the phrase 'digital first' is not just used descriptively but also as an imperative, saying to teachers that 'digital' should be their first port of call, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. As I said before, now that for the foreseeable future physical co-

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[7] The latter examples are not insignificant, because companies such as Apple and Google are making their way into the education market quite explicitly – see, for example, the so-called 'Apple Teacher' (https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT206841) and 'google education' (https://edu.google.com/?modal_active=none).

presence has been taken out of the teacher's toolkit, this can no longer be the first option – or perhaps we should say: the first reflex – in thinking about the design and enactment of education. The phrase 'digital first' is the placeholder for indicating that as educators we need to look elsewhere. At the same time the phrase is problematic, because it is a phrase about the *means* of education and I wish to argue – as I have done before[8] – that any decision about the means of education can only be taken with reference to the *ends* of education, that is, in relation to the purpose or purposes of our educational endeavours.

Viewed in this light, the imperative 'digital first' sounds as odd as carpenters having to work under the imperative of 'hammer first.' After all, whether we need a hammer, a screwdriver or some improvised ingenuity, depends first and foremost on the situation at hand. It's for a good carpenter to come to a judgement about what the situation requires and, based on that, an initial judgement about the most feasible approach, although even in good carpentry we need an ongoing 'dialogue' between ends and means, rather than work on the assumption that both are fixed.[9]

So this is where the phrase 'digital first' becomes misleading, and I wish to suggest that the simple but in my view profound response to this can only be: education first! And putting education first, means that in all situations the first question we need to ask, is what we are 'after,' to put it in general terms, which is the question of the purpose of our activities. Although we may wish to translate the overarching purpose of our activities into ends and aims for students to achieve, I am reminded of Lawrence Stenhouse's important point that purpose is less about 'having a goal' than about 'having an agenda,' that is, a sense of orientation for one's actions and activities.[10]

Two things are important in the case of education. One is that education can never be orientated towards a single purpose – which is part of the problem with the language of learning and the more general 'learnification' of education[11] – but always needs to take three

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[8] See, for example, Biesta, G.J.J. (2017). 'How does a competent teacher become a good teacher? On judgement, wisdom, and virtuosity in teaching and teacher education'. In M.A. Peters, B. Cowie & I. Menter (Eds), *A Companion to Research in Teacher Education* (pp. 435-453). Dordrecht: Springer. And also: Biesta, G.J.J. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy.* Boulder, Co: Paradigm Publishers.

[9] This is the means-ends-continuum that plays a central role in Dewey's work. See, for example, Waks, L. (1999). The Means-Ends Continuum and the Reconciliation of Science and Art in the Later Works of John Dewey. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, 35*(3), 595-611. Retrieved August 19, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/40320781. See also Biesta, G.J.J. & Burbules, N. (2003). *Pragmatism and educational research.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

[10] See: Stenhouse, L. (1988), Artistry and teaching: The teacher as focus of research and development. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision 4*(1), 43-51.

[11] See: Biesta, G.J.J. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability 21*(1), 33-46.

purposes (or as I prefer: three domains of purpose) into consideration. There is important work to be done with regard to *qualification*: providing our students with the knowledge, skills and dispositions that equip them for meaningful action in the world. There is, in addition to this, important work to be done with regard to *socialisation*: providing students with access to the many practices and traditions, ways of doing and ways of being, that have been developed over the centuries, and helping them to find their place within these. And there is the crucial work of *subjectification*: encouraging and supporting our students to be(come) subjects of their own lives, and not remain or become objects of influences outside of them.

'Education first' means that we always need to start with a consideration of what we seek to achieve with our students in relation to these three domains of purpose. It is then up to us as educators to figure out *how* we might balance the demands from these three domains, bearing in mind that there is no perfect synergy between the three, which requires that we engage with tensions and consider possible trade-offs between the three domains. And only then do we move to the question of 'how,' that is the question of the means we which to bring into play for giving form to the work with our students. Here we have to bear in mind, that this is never the question of finding the most effective means for bringing about particular ends, because in education the way how we do things also matters for what we seek to achieve. Put bluntly: it may well be effective to pay our students for their efforts or achievements, but doing so may undermine our ambition to encourage them to become an active partner in the educational endeavour instead of a (more or less) willing object.

To suggest that education should always come first, thus means that any decisions we make about the 'how' of our practice always must be made with reference to the 'what for,' and that even when our 'toolkit' is limited, for example because physical co-presence is not possible, we should not immediately plug the gap with another tool, but start from our educational priorities. And the political point here, of course, is that there are very powerful players – Apple, Google and Pearson, to name a few[12] – who are more than happy to plug the gap for us. Which brings me to my third and final point.

3. Teachers don't lack skills, digital or otherwise
The third aspect of what is currently going on is the frequent – and I am inclined to say: constant – repetition of the claim that teachers lack skills and, more specifically, that teachers lack the 'digital skills' that are needed for making a successful transition to online education. Once this is accepted, it not just follows that this particular 'skills gap' needs to be plugged – which explains the huge surge in (mostly online) provision for teachers to upgrade their digital skills. It also opens the door widely for a very particular, skills-based understanding of education which sees the work of educators mainly in technical terms, and 'forgets' about the complexities of educational practice: the educational complexities, the moral complexities,

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[12] On Pearson see: Sellar, S. & Hogan, A. (2019). *Pearson 2025. Transforming teaching and privatising education data.* Brussels: Education International.

the emotional complexities, the affective complexities, and the political complexities, to name but a few.

One important task in this regard – which lies beyond the scope of this brief essay – is a critical analysis of assumptions about and conceptions of teaching and education in the main documents, frameworks, and resources that are being put in place as a response to the pandemic.[13] My impression is that such documents contribute significantly to the promotion of a learning-based conception of education – think, for example, of the popular but highly problematic idea of 'learning loss' – and thus of teaching as a process of facilitating learning and of the teacher as such a facilitator. Not only do questions about the purpose and content of learning quickly disappear from the radar. Also, to frame the work of teaching entirely in terms of learning and its facilitation, undermines any idea of teaching as a practical, situated art in which the artistry of teachers, that is, their inventive ability to create educationally significant situations and opportunities for their students in always new and unique situations, plays a crucial role.[14]

What I'm not suggesting, of course, is that all teachers are perfectly equipped for all the possible situations that they may encounter. But by resisting the dogma that what teachers lack are digital skills, I am trying to highlight that everything in education begins with the educational artistry of teachers – which requires knowledge and skills, but also a capacity for judgement and for creative educational inventiveness – and that the question whether teachers may be missing anything is itself a situated question, not a blanket observation about the state of the profession as a whole.

In conclusion

In one sense the current situation is unprecedented; in another sense it is not, particularly not when we see that the very art of teaching has to do with engaging with situations which we have not encountered before. While there are similarities between groups of students, and while the organisation of education also entails much repetition from year to year, each group of students is in some respects also entirely new, and to create good education out of this mix of the expected and the unexpected, of precedented and unprecedented elements, is what teaching is about. It cannot be denied that the Covid-19 virus is having an impact on education; it depends on us whether we will allow it to undermine the artistry that is crucial for education to be a meaningful endeavour, both for students and for their teachers, or whether we will be able to resist such an attack.

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[13] I commend the work of Samuel Mendonça and colleagues in Brazil, who are in the process of analysing such documents, for example from the Worldbank, Unesco and the OECD, precisely with a focus on ideas about teaching and education.

[14] The idea of teaching is an art has a long pedigree. Recent views about the artistry of teaching can, for example, be found in the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and Elliot Eisner.