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Is remote learning a model for the future?

By Prof. Elsbeth Stern

How will technology-delivered instruction affect learning? It's still too early to reach a conclusion, but the implications for exams are clear, says Elsbeth Stern.

Since mid-March, schools and universities worldwide have faced the challenge of converting their learning instruction to ICT (information and communications technology) almost overnight. Teachers who until recently have used Moodle merely for storing slides and texts are now communicating with learners via Zoom and WhatsApp. At many institutions, including ETH, it's working surprisingly well. Most teachers, whether at university or school, recognise that some of these digital methods will be adopted in the long term. Certainly, after presenting my lectures – hopefully to "real" students in the near future – I'll be offering Zoom sessions for small groups at off-peak times and weekends when we can go over any outstanding questions.

Fair exams barely feasible

But during the experience thrust on us in the last two months, we've come to see exactly where personal presence is irreplaceable. One area is in ensuring fair and viable exams. This spring, those taking an exam that may be decisive for their professional and academic future have often been undeservedly lucky. Provisions were generous, since any failure to pass would be legally contestable under the new conditions, and would not stand up to appeal. Zurich's Department of Education, for instance, waived the oral entrance exam for the short-term grammar school. Diploma exams have been cancelled at many grammar schools, and universities may not exclude anyone from a course of study for failing an exam.
Where online exams taken at home have resulted in a pass, there's always the nagging question: how can we be sure there was no cheating? And we've had to do without tried and tested exam formats for large groups, such as multiple choice tasks. Yet reliable examinations are indispensable for assuring the quality of our educational institutions.

Running into errors

Decisions based on unreliable exam situations can lead to two mistakes in our education system: either someone unsuitable is selected, or someone who actually is suitable is rejected. The exam procedures in force this spring and summer rule out the second possibility, but mean the first is much more likely to happen. Pupils and students will receive a certificate stating that they've achieved a learning objective, although in fact they haven't acquired the necessary skills or knowledge. We should

be aware of the great problems this causes. I hope that computer-based exams will be used more often in schools and universities in the future – but these must be taken under supervision, and not on the edge of a bed or at a corner of the dining table.

Too soon to judge

So although teachers have made every effort to hold fair and credible exams, we know that the results obtained in the early summer of 2020 should be assessed differently than usual. And what about the educational outcomes of remote learning? We don't have reliable data on this yet, but experiences vary considerably. At university, the impression is positive on the whole, and initial interim reports suggest that the learning opportunities afforded by distance learning have been at least as well received as those of the face-to-face teaching model. However, we must be careful not to jump to conclusions. After all, more has changed for the students than just the switch from face-to-face to distance learning: the shutdown of public life ruled out a number of alternatives to studying, so most young people will have spent more time at their studies than usual.

"We may be approaching a new normality, but school learning cannot be accomplished without in-person interaction."

Elsbeth Stern