

E-learning and the future of education

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The lockdown during COVID-19 pandemic has reassessed the value of online learning and services platforms in our daily lives, with people also considering online schooling as an alternative to school in the long run, be it for its flexibility, security or cost effectiveness.

However, can e-learning replace the school structure? What shapes the future of education in the world? And how can Lebanon benefit from it?

According to a UNESCO data report on the impact of COVID -19 on education the compulsory closure of schools worldwide has affected 91 percent of the student population. Although the phase has proven the growing need for flexibility and technology, all have realized the importance of the school structure and the need for face-to-face teaching. The consistency of showing up at a certain time in a certain place tailored entirely to education is undoubtedly key to a successful education. The social element also plays a vital role in the student experience, whereby there is a level of human interaction and intimacy that cannot be found in an online platform. Nevertheless, schools demonstrated their ability to adapt to the new normal in innovative flexible ways. Of course, the e-learning efficiency depends on the level of readiness of a country's education system for this major shift. Nevertheless, it provided an opportunity for the education system in general to re-invent itself by adapting to the technological advances.

Traditional educators who were once resistant to the use of technology are now convinced that technology advances the teaching experience but does not replace them. The experience has been challenging for them, but it also gave them insight into what is needed to prosper and meet their "digital-native" students. They should now benefit from this experience and build on it to renew their credibility and revitalize learning for the future.

They can do so by creating a blended system that uses the two approaches complementarily. In advanced countries like the United States and Australia, blended systems are being set up. A collaborative position paper between New Pedagogies for Deep Learning and Microsoft Education with the collaboration of UNESCO, "Education Reimagined; The Future of Learning" by M. Fullan, J. Quinn, M. Drummy, M. Gardner (2020), discussed the transition from traditional to a "reimagined education system." The strategy studies three phases from school disruption, to transition toward school's reopening, to recreating a vision for a hybrid deep learning approach that equips students to succeed into the future.

For Lebanon, the situation is critical. Challenges are countless, especially with the economic crisis, the rise in poverty, coronavirus and the Beirut explosion with all its impacts. Even prior to the blast, the country's situation has long been deteriorating at many levels. Education, which was once Lebanon's pride, is failing. A report by Dr. Sawma Abou Jaoudeh and Dr. Nada Mneymneh, followed by a series of studies published in Al Nahar newspaper on Oct. 2, 2019, in collaboration with The American University of Beirut, questions the efficiency of education in Lebanon. The studies reveal the deep deterioration of the Lebanese education throughout the years according to international assessments. For example in Trends in International Maths and Sciences Study that assesses student achievement in mathematics and science at fourth and eighth grades of public and private schools, Lebanon ranked 34 out of 39 in sciences, and 27 in Maths in 2015. After being the first among 10 Arab countries participating in TIMSS in 2003 it became the seventh in 2015. In the Program for International Student Assessment, another international assessment measuring 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics and science aptitude, Lebanon ranked 67 out of 72. The region's young people "are quite good at repeating what they've learned but not at participating in tasks that require students to think creatively," said PISA creator and director Andrea Schneider.

The results revealed that only 2.5 percent of Lebanese students can compete internationally. They spotlight the students' bad performance in critical thinking and problem solving, two vital elements for living and working in the 21st century. They also call for revising the education system in Lebanon that no longer meets the needs of a competitive economy.

The education budget should be thus redirected to this end. Lebanon can benefit from the international aid allocated to education to endorse initiatives, build partnerships and do what it takes to tailor a comprehensive modernized education system, relying on successful research-based blended models enhancing students' competency and critical thinking skills.

Educators may adopt the evidenced-based learning and the collaboration model (teacher-admin-parents-government) to form a new blended education strategy for the future. Online platforms can be used in parallel to school for knowledge acquisition, lessons support, tests, assessments and absences. Teachers will thus have more free time in class to invest on the cognitive and personal development of the child, focusing more on discussions, skills building and personalized support. Keeping online learning within the school landscape can even help in having contingency plan to any emergency that may arise in our future.

If there is one thing Lebanon should be keen on among the endless crises that keep emerging, it is education. Lebanon, where the poor sacrifice their lives to educate their kids, should restore its position as a regional hub for education excellence. Technology may be an obstacle but can be turned to an opportunity to step into a modernized state beginning with the new generations.

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