

Chapter 5

Mentoring Teams as a Model of Supporting Distance Teaching: The Croatian Example

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author describes how the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education organized support for the education system during the COVID-19 pandemic building upon education reform and using the mentoring teams as the main resource for learning content creation and teachers' support network. One of the most significant activities during educational reform was the establishment of virtual classrooms whose main characteristics were continuous professional development support in the online environment for learning, communication and collaboration, quick access to the new and relevant information, and establishment of the learning community of practice. The hybrid model of continuous professional development combined with mentoring teams who were already experts in remote work and online collaboration and communication contributed to the swift and effective establishment of distance learning. This chapter provides information from the teacher perspective giving ideas and examples that can be used in future professional development and collaborative teamwork.

INTRODUCTION

It was the beginning of March 2020 when schools in Italy started to close down. Being in the close neighbourhood, Croatia expected to be under the influence of COVID-19 pandemic very soon. The Croatian Ministry of Science and Education immediately started preparations for school closure in Croatia and the transition towards the distant teaching and learning. There are 1 300 primary and secondary schools, 460 000 students, and 60 000 teachers in Croatia.

Moreover, preparations were ongoing in the background, confidentiality agreements were being signed by all involved in the planning of this operation. The scale of the project is sufficiently illustrated by the figures - if we take into account the number of pupils, students, teachers, professors and staff in schools

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7638-0.ch005

and universities, mentors, employees of the Ministry of Science and Education, Croatian Academic and Research Network – CARNET, University Computing Centre -Srce, Internet Service Providers, national television, publishers who were preparing online materials – we come to a number of more than one million actors (excluding parents). Secrecy was important not to raise the level of panic in public in a situation where schools in other European countries have not yet started to close massively (MoE, 2020a). Planning started in parallel for a few areas: for the technical solutions, policies, and regulations, learning content production and support network. In this chapter we are focusing on the areas of learning content production and support network which were realised by the Mentoring teams. Interviews were held with mentors to collect their emotional reflection about starting the preparation and content creation in an incognito mode, what decisions they made, how they organised collaboration and communication within the teams, which area they have to focus on – considering such a short period of time they had for preparations.

THE PLAN FOR REMOTE SCHOOLING BUILT ON THE COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULAR REFORM

At the beginning of March, when school closure was announced as a potential measure, the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia (MoE) started preparations for distance teaching and learning. It took two weeks to move all classes online, and distance learning was successfully launched on March 16th 2020.

The concept was based on two key principles:

1. Access has to be provided to all, adapted to student age
2. There needs to be a backup channel for every solution (TV, web, LMS, social networks, messaging platforms) (MoE, 2020a)

Ministry of Science and Education created a national school/grade schedule, which was envisaged in such a way that, in case the situation lasts until the end of the school year, would enable pupils to acquire the learning outcomes defined in the subject curricula. The national schedule foresees approximately 5 hours of schoolwork a day, but schools can add extra hours for their pupils. Each school has organised a virtual staffroom for teachers and virtual classrooms for students (Figure 2) on various platforms (Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Yammer, Google Classroom) where teachers communicate daily with their pupils, give them instructions and learning resources, check their activity and completion of tasks (MoE, 2020a).

In implementing digitalisation during previous years, the priority of the Ministry of Science and Education was to ensure teachers' digital independence, which meant ensuring that teachers have their own laptops and classrooms are equipped with overhead projectors or interactive/smart whiteboards, so that various types of content and multimedia can be used in all classes. Strong emphasis was put on developing teachers' digital competences and enabling them to work in a virtual environment. Teacher training for the curricular reform was launched online in 2018, via virtual classrooms on the Moodle platform, which enabled continuous professional development and online cooperation for teachers. In almost two years more than 50 000 teachers participated in these trainings. This was the key experience that later enabled teachers to establish virtual classrooms and communicate with students and other teachers without difficulty. All those virtual classrooms are used as a support network for teachers, sharing learning resources, ideas and information and for direct communication with the Ministry. The training

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