

Chapter 6

From Traditional to Distance Learning: Chronicle of a Switch From Physical to Virtual – Using the Game Metaphor to Understand the Process

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ABSTRACT

In winter 2020, Coronavirus silently spread from a Chinese metropolis globally. Schools closed and emergency distance teaching was enforced wherever possible. This chapter examines this phenomenon as it took place in an Italian upper secondary school and applies the rules of gamification as a key to understanding the process and the interconnections of all the agents that played a role. The theoretical background includes Werbach and Hunter’s game theory, the SAMR model of Ruben Puentedura, and the findings of social and emotional learning (SEL), with the aim to analyze not only the technical transformations with their consequences on teaching practices, but also the emotional impact the pandemic had on teachers and pupils. The results of the first national surveys about the effect of the lockdown months are taken into consideration to validate the author’s experience, as well as articles and studies from sources such as UNESCO, OECD, and the Economic World Forum. The description of what happened as if it were a proper game may shed some light into the complexity of this experience.

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 2020, what had seemed a local sanitary problem in a Chinese metropolis silently spread over the globe. In an irresistible if deceptive sweep from east to west, coronavirus forced whole populations into restraint and confinement.

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On March 8, it was Italy's turn, and the approximate 8,000 state educational institutions in the country faced a dilemma: how should they keep in touch with their students and keep their learning going?

The story of the forced switch to digital by a whole secondary school, seen from the privileged point of view of the support person for teaching with digital tools, can be revealing. How did the process develop, from chaos to a new kind of organization? How was a new decision-making chain established? How did the school stakeholders – teachers, students and parents – respond?

While the different institutions laboured through organizational, technical and behavioural changes, patterns started to emerge. It was then, and precisely when educators started to think that school had to be taken “to the next level”, that a paradigm gained significance: the paradigm of gaming.

This chapter is going to apply this paradigm as a key to understanding what happened.

THE CONTEXT

The application of the described paradigm is going to be based on the close observation of what took place in a specific school, namely “Liceo classico e linguistico F. Petrarca” (from now on “Liceo Petrarca”) in Trieste, Italy.

This is an upper secondary school specializing in modern and ancient languages and literature, populated by 936 pupils and 101 teachers in the academic year 2019-2020. The non-teaching staff includes 8 people in the administration offices and 2 technicians, only one of whom has an ICT (Information and Communication Technology) background.

The students, who are divided into 44 classes, range from 14 to 19 years of age, being 19 the age of admission to university in Italy, after 13 years of primary and secondary education. The number of pupils in a class can vary from 16 to 28. It is important to underline, in this context, that classes are formed when 14-year-old pupils enroll in the school and proceed with only minor changes to the end of secondary tuition, five years later, as one's curriculum in Italy is not individually chosen - the students' choice of subjects depends on the kind of school they have enrolled in. As a consequence, strong bonds are formed between pupils who grow up together as a group for five long years.

Liceo Petrarca used to have the reputation of being an innovative school at the beginning of the new millennium. Nowadays, after a long period of slow decline, it is considered quite traditional, albeit successful in terms of the number of students who are admitted to university and reach their degrees, often with good results. ICT is not a subject of study, nor are the students encouraged to use it, unless they come across teachers who are personally motivated and technically skilled. Technology is indeed used in a number of projects that entail partnerships with other European schools, which requires communication at a distance and collaborative work in producing digital objects (presentations, videos, games...). Each classroom in the school has a computer and a projector, which are normally used to show the digital content of the students' textbooks (videos, slides, audios in a foreign language, extra texts) or videos found in the web. The school can also count on two mobile labs (20 nine-year-old Macbook laptops and 20 relatively recent iPads), a very old computer laboratory mounting a Linux distribution that no-one is currently able to update and a brand new computer laboratory (using Windows as an OS, like the class devices) that was inaugurated just 10 days before lockdown. The strong point is a high-speed fiber connection ensuring that disruptions during online activities are really rare.

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