Reimagining Education, not Relocating It: A Reflection for the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

As we prepare for the upcoming academic year and the new normal COVID-19 initiated, how are we as teachers framing our approach? Are we asking how we teach online? Or, are we asking what learning looks like for online and hybrid experiences? The author suggests that the questions we ask guide our decisions and identifies the obstacles we face. By contextualizing the challenges and change we are presented with as adaptive, we can become more conscious of what may be impacting our work and consider paths forward that ensure the equitable success of our students.

Keywords

Pedagogy, paradigm, adaptive change, COVID-19

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As we prepare for the upcoming academic year and the new normal COVID-19 initiated, how are we as teachers framing our approach? Are we asking how we teach online? Or, are we asking what learning looks like for online and hybrid experiences? The author suggests that the questions we ask guide our decisions and identifies the obstacles we face. By contextualizing the challenges and change we are presented with as adaptive, we can become more conscious of what may be impacting our work and consider paths forward that ensure the equitable success of our students.

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic was unfolding and concern grew that schools would close, the conversations I had with colleagues – fellow teachers – centered on a singular meta-question: "How do I teach online?" In schools that weren't one-to-one, this question was particularly stressful because teacher engagement with online learning platforms varied. In response, many schools held emergency meetings to introduce teachers to the variety of tools available within the platform used by the school. But the question asked by teachers, "How do I teach online?" became the lens through which they were exploring the school's online learning platform. As a consequence, teachers relocated their classroom practices online in an effort to maintain consistency and not interrupt instruction. But all of those practices didn't exactly translate into this new space. As a result, many teachers, students, and families believe that though schools did the best they could, it wasn't good enough. So, as planning begins for the next school year, the question,

"How do I teach online?" has been nuanced to "How do I better teach online or in hybrid form with what I've learned from the spring?"

I suggest this question – or any version of it – isn't the right one to ask, however. We cannot continue the exercise of thinking how to better relocate education to online learning platforms. Rather, we need to reimagine education. In doing so, the question we ask becomes, "How do I a construct a successful learning experience for students that transcends online, hybrid, or in-person contexts?" Reimagining education requires us to examine the paradigm we use as the starting point for our conversation. This creates an adaptive challenge and change to the work we do as educators. In this reflection piece, I will present how I differentiate pedagogical and paradigmatic conversations and questions, explore the nature of adaptive challenge and change, explain why adaptive change is different from technical fixes, and propose how the COVID-19 pandemic is creating an adaptive challenge for educators.

Reimagining Education is Paradigmatic in Nature

In the world of education, pedagogy (the method and practice of teaching) is at the heart of our work. However, how often do we take time to think about the paradigms (the patterns, models, or worldviews that underlie theories and methodologies) that inform our practice? How we approach our thinking about education matters. The conversations we have and the questions we ask depend on whether we are we are framing them as a matter of pedagogy or paradigm.

The Pedagogical Conversation & Questions

For example, when we ask how teaching happens online, we are asking a pedagogical question. Consequently as school closure looked imminent, teachers focused on finding, creating, and transitioning to the technology and platforms that supported the existing pedagogies already practiced with the intact, in-person method of teaching on campus. The formula employed in the pedagogical emphasis was: "I do x in the classroom. How do I do x online?" When classroom pedagogies were challenged by online capacities and bandwidths, we interpreted it as the unavoidable consequences of the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. By using pedagogies designed to be supported by structures (such as bells, desks, boards, movement in the room, paper, etc.) that were no longer present, the work began to feel forced, onerous, or irrelevant.

The emphasis on pedagogy limited the imagination to delivery, not purpose. It also risked making matters of equity and justice secondary or tertiary – as auxiliary components – to the primary concern: maintaining the status quo. It's not that it was jettisoned. Rather, the additional resources and work needed to

create accommodations became a luxury few schools could afford, both in time constraints and financially. The pedagogical frame is fundamentally an exercise of relocating education.

The Paradigmatic Conversation & Questions

An emphasis on paradigm, however, would generate an entirely different conversation. By asking how we construct an online learning experience for our students, the possibilities and limits of online learning platforms would shape and establish the perimeters of delivery. Asking, "This is what I do in the classroom, how do I make it happen online?" presupposes the classroom and online learning platforms are functionally the same. The right question for teachers to ask is, "How does this component, app, page, etc. allow me to create the content I need in order for students to fully engage the course material?" The emphasis on paradigm focuses attention to the learning objectives, core content, and course outcomes. The purpose of the course, not it's delivery, becomes the focus because paradigms are inherently ontological, epistemological, and conceptual in nature (Bunniss & Kelly, 2010).

Additionally, the lens of equity and justice can be incorporated as guiding principles, not limitations or afterthoughts, to the learning experiences teachers are generating for students. It creates *new* pedagogies designed for the *new* learning environment and *new* learning modes mindful of the *new* reality in which our students are living. It challenges us to name our own attitudes, beliefs, biases, and comfort levels as educators. It compels us to see our students as the subjects of our work, not the objects thus allowing them to become active participants not passive recipients of their learning. It allows us to see the person before us not the task at hand. The paradigmatic frame is fundamentally an exercise of reimagining education.

Reimagining Education is an Adaptive Challenge & Change

For many teachers, however, recognizing the value of paradigm followed by pedagogy is more than just a matter of where the conversation begins and how it unfolds. They may feel a sense of challenge or change to the very way they understand their role and purpose as teacher. The change is more than just *doing something* different or new; it's a matter of *being someone* different or new. I would suggest, in fact, the higher levels of exhaustion so many teachers felt at the end of the school year demonstrates this point. Yes, we were faced with a paradigmatic challenge and approached it as a pedagogical one. But more than just that: we have an adaptive challenge before us and we are trying to remedy it with technical solutions.

Contrasting adaptive from technical challenge and change is critical to our success in reimagining education. In their work *Leadership on the Line*, Heifitz and Linksy (2002) identify two types of challenges and change: technical and adaptive. Technical challenges and change tend to be clear to define; rely on experts or authority to solve them; can be resolved relatively quickly; and the learning they involve is informative, but not disruptive. Adaptive challenges and change, however, are much harder to define and easier to deny; it is necessary for everyone to be part of the solution; are long-term and collaborative in nature; require changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors; and the learning needed is transformative resulting in a shift of perception. The distinction between the two is easily illustrated with the following example: if one has high-blood pressure the adaptive challenge involves changing one's diet and exercise; the technical solution is a pill.

The adaptive challenge and change will usually be met with resistance. Heifitz and Linsky (2002) also suggest when faced with adaptive challenge and change, people will want the technical fix. Furthermore, when the person suggesting the adaptive change does so with persistence, the people experiencing the invitation to do so will seek the intervention of that person's perceived authority figure. In short, we want the quick, easy, path of least resistance to address a problem or challenge. The reality is, however, the sustainability of any solution requires adaptive and behavioral changes.

The Adaptive Challenge and Change of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Providing a brief overview of the general tenets of adaptive change identified by Heifitz and Linsky (2002) allows us to focus on each component and better see how the reimagining of education is necessarily adaptive in its scope and definition. Student learning and success is contingent upon our ability to adapt the way we educate them. The world in which our students are living and learning is irrevocably different. As they ready themselves for a new academic year, we are shortsighted in our thinking if we interpret the last academic year as a hiccup or aberration of the norm. If reading this causes some discomfort or pushback, we have our first evidence of the adaptive challenge before us.

Adaptive challenges and change are much harder to define and easier to deny. Reimagining education by focusing on paradigm rather than pedagogy prevents the conversation from immediately becoming about what needs to be done. Rather, it enters the more ambiguous category of ideas, dispositions, priorities, and values. This can easily be dismissed as lacking any level of practicality and praxis and thus be rejected. We've all been in meetings where a colleague essentially says, "I don't have time for that; we need to act now." Comments of this nature essentially deny the presence of the adaptive challenge

before us. But it's attractive to find the argument compelling because the matter at hand is rather ambiguous. What are the issues during the COVID-19 pandemic? Accessibility? Direction from school leadership? The possibilities and limitations of online learning platforms? Preparedness? Transition? Change? Time? Online learning fatigue? Loss? Discomfort? Confusion? Sense of fragility and temporality? All of the above? None of the above? The breadth and intersectionality of these questions underscores just how difficult it was to define what the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic is to education.

In adaptive challenges and change, it is necessary for everyone to be part of the solution. It's important to note, the adaptive challenge and change of the COVID-19 pandemic was not exclusively the domain of teachers. School administrators, students, and quarantined families, all faced their respective challenges and changes too. If the work that is before us is, as I suggest, a generative and creative one of reimagining education, we are served well to remember the totality of our contexts. We cannot afford our new way of being educators to limit the new ways in which other stakeholders are being school administrators, students, etc. And vice versa. When we encounter resistance from them, it's important to remember that resistance is actually valuable feedback, not insurrection. Resistance to change is a powerful way for us to learn about missing pieces and the faulty assumptions informing our plans (Ford & Ford, 2009). The consciousness of others as part of the solution underscores the adaptive nature of reimagining education.

Adaptive challenges and change are long-term and collaborative in nature. The news emerging from China that another swine-flu is being observed and the recent spike in COVID-19 diagnosis serve as powerful reminders that the experience of the spring is not the isolated instance we hope it is. To use the phrase of these days, this is our new normal. We must necessarily acknowledge the systems and structures we need to create are not stopgap measures. They are establishing the norms for how we will proceed in the foreseeable future. Because of their scope, we are wise to engage this as a collaborative effort in which we learn from one another and establish expectations through a process of dialogue and collaboration. As the point above suggests, what we create must be done with a consciousness of all stakeholders and not as siloed endeavors. If teachers begin to imagine approaches to online and distance learning that are not possible, we fail our students. Social justice requires us to create systems, policies, procedures, and processes that are inclusive in nature from their conception. Developing a plan, assessing who is negatively impacted or excluded by it, then generating accommodations and exemptions for them is not an exercise of justice and equity. To deny our students access and participation in their learning because of this is a failure in the practice of social justice.

Adaptive challenges and change require changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The COVID-19 pandemic is a watershed moment for education. The attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that informed our practice as teachers do not easily translate to the contemporary needs of our students as they navigate quarantine, hybrid learning, or the suddenness of transitioning between different modes of learning. *We* need to be the agents of change. *We* need to reexamine what we hold as constitutive to education and what *we* hold as familiar. *We* need to bravely accept what we discern and recognize that the consequences of our clarity cannot be at the expense of our students – especially those most vulnerable in our respective communities.

In adaptive challenges and change, the learning needed is transformative which results in a shift of perception. The needed shift in perception corroborates the premise that what is necessary in this moment is to focus on paradigm and have clarity as to what that paradigm is. The learning a teacher undergoes as they examine their classes to identify more clearly the learning objectives, core content, and course outcomes must be transformative in nature. At the heart of that transformation is recognizing that teachers are the facilitators of learning, not the primary mode of instruction. We design the experiences students have online and in class. We sift through the available resources to assemble a cohesive lesson or unit. We need to recognize that classes in which students are learning at different paces and in different modes are dynamic, not chaotic. This shift in perception is imperative to reimagining education.

Concluding Thoughts

When faced with adaptive challenge and change, people will want the technical fix. Part of wanting that technical fix is looking to leadership to provide it. Teachers wanted school leaders to generate the solution. Many school leaders believed the responsibility was solely theirs and found themselves providing directives and suggestions with limited understanding of online education and learning. Uniformity was pitched as consistency. Growth opportunities were understood as shortcomings that should have been anticipated. With these variables, the cycle of technical fixes was perpetuated. The pedagogical emphasis is technical in nature. That isn't to say it was easy or immediate. Nonetheless, it didn't require a fundamental reframe to teaching; its focus was relocating it.

The introduction of emergency policies and other exemptions made in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic reveal a certain inconvenient truth: we work in a totally constructed reality – the result of our beliefs, underlying assumptions, dispositions, values, etc. codified and perpetuated. The policies, rules, etc. that we have protected and honored as objective immutable truths were shown to be

expendable when they were challenged by the recognition that what we did on campus did not fully relocate to the online and virtual space. Accepting that we work in a constructed reality, allows us to reimagine it.

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