

E-LEARNING IN PANDEMIC TIMES - NOT ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE



According to UNESCO, the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has affected nearly 1.5 billion students around the world, both in basic and university education. Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, says that “as a society, we never had a precedent for a standstill in the education of such scale”. For this reason, the international organization has launched the Global Education Coalition, created with the goal of preserving the right to education through the reactivation of the industry.

Following this initiative, several governments around the world have launched plans to offer the population the opportunity to continue their studies from home, avoiding social contact and helping to stop the spread of the pandemic. Remote learning can include a variety of formats, such as videotaped lectures or live Zoom conference, testing, laboratory work, services where students can create or [buy powerpoint presentation](#) templates, scientific online libraries and play-by-play training lessons to consolidate studied material.

In addition, educational institutions have switched to digital platforms to cover both students’ and teachers’ demands.

What Is E-learning?

Online learning is one of the digital education branches and consists of the use of technological devices, tools and the Internet to design educational material, teach and evaluate through digital means. It is a structured, planned method based on a series of well-defined processes.

The new normal of the pandemic times has shaken the educational system, transforming processes and protocols in favor of improving the educational experience. However, implementing online learning processes during the pandemic involves overcoming some challenges to ensure their success. This is mainly because, in the new normal, there are scenarios that make education more uphill compared to the pre-pandemic era. The main ones are:

- The anxiety that students must face and its negative effect on educational performance.
- The ethnic, social and economic background that makes the gaps wider for the most disadvantaged students.

Teacher Education

Each of these scenarios highlight challenges that must be overcome to ensure that e-learning is fair and meets the needs established by UNESCO and the Global Education Coalition:

- **Technology**

E-learning is entirely dependent on access to the internet and the use of technological devices that are compatible with available teaching and learning tools. This means that, by definition, those teachers and students who do not have an internet connection or have limited internet will not have access to online learning and teaching. The same goes for those who do not have access to up-to-date technological devices. To overcome this, governments of the world must guarantee that

internet is equally available among all sectors of the population and that they also have access to the appropriate technology or, at least, that the tools used are compatible with available technology.

- **Socio-economic Factors**

Due to the socio-economic differences that exist in the population, many students make use of the institution's computers and internet to study. The closure of schools and universities as a measure to reduce social interactions has limited access to the necessary tools for e-learning. The result has been that low-income students show a slower transition into digital platforms, particularly because studies show that as purchasing power declines, internet access does as well.

- **Digital Skills**

Digital skills are known as a set of tools and knowledge that are necessary to communicate, solve problems, handle information and other aspects related to online learning. Despite the fact that a large part of students were born into the digital age, this does not mean that they have the skills to use said tools, especially when it comes to the learning platform. The same goes for academic personnel, who have to develop new technology skills in record time.

In order to overcome this barrier, it is necessary that all institutions invest in the time to train faculty members and students in the use of the platforms to guarantee that they are used correctly and that the process is effective.

- **Evaluation and Supervision**

After the implementation of online platforms, it is important to carry out a test where teachers identify if the objectives were met or not. During the pandemic, it is almost impossible to use an evaluation system similar to the one during face-to-face classes, starting with the fact that cheating is unavoidable. For this reason, online training also implies designing new evaluation strategies that are capable of knowing if the student has reliably achieved the objectives set for the course and/or classes.

- **Work Overload**

Moving to digital platforms involves additional work that consists of designing platforms and digitizing educational material. This translates into an extra effort for teachers and educational institutions (infrastructure and electronic devices, for example).

- **Compatibility**

One of the key aspects of online learning is the compatibility between the career being studied and online platforms. The clearest example is that of careers that necessarily need face-to-face practical sessions to complete the curriculum. This is essential since online experience cannot replace the sensory experience of in-person practical sessions.

Advantages of e-learning

Despite the great challenges that it implies, e-learning brings many advantages in the pandemic times, including:

- **Flexibility:** it allows students to complete school and university hours while following self-isolation and social distancing measures.

- Self-management: students are in control of the learning process and can adapt their learning hours to their daily activities, as well as reviewing the material as many times as necessary.
- Learning rate: students who learn online have a higher knowledge retention rate (25-60%) compared to learning in the classroom (8-10%).
- Economic accessibility: e-learning, even if it requires technological devices, can help save on transportation and housing expenses that are often added to face-to-face classes, especially for international students.

E-learning Is Here to Stay

Many experts argue that online learning is here to stay, even after the pandemic. The advantages that this format brings made it clear that many of the processes that until now had been restricted to physical space can be transferred to online learning, providing even more benefits than those obtained through conventional education.

However, even though this sounds very promising, remote education is not equally possible for all countries or sectors of society. This means that more than being a 'perfect concept' or the 'ideal alternative', online education is a goal that must be achieved with equality and closing the socio-economic gap as much as possible.

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