

ONLINE SCHOOLING. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON THE LEARNER. PROBLEMS. SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: *By analysing the reports generated by the administration of the acting school I teach in - Inlight Center, our team has tried to assess the impact that the pandemic context is having on the learner, identify the causes and problems, find and implement solutions that may positively affect the trainee. The present article will present in 3 chapters the impact of the pandemic on the learner, the identified problems and the solutions we've tried to implement in the acting school. For the purpose of this article, I have consulted with Liana Grigorescu, a specialist at the Obregia Clinical Hospital in Bucharest, in an attempt to better structure my understanding and make proper use of the specialized terminology.*

Keywords: *acting courses, online learning, pandemic, anxiety, interactive learning*

1. The state of emergency and its effects on the learner

The negative effects of the pandemic and particularly those of the state of emergency on our members and teachers have been gradual and have mainly manifested on a psychological level. This was a global situation addressed by teachers and researchers all over the world.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ “COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and U.S. education policy: Lessons from pre-pandemic research to inform relief, recovery, and rebuilding”, *Economic Policy Institute*, <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-consequences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-education-performance-and-equity-in-the-united-states-what-can-we->

For this study I made use of a qualitative research strategy by employing two of its specific methods of approach: the interview - it consisted of 24 participants, 2 teachers and one specialist - and the technique of observation - for all the courses conducted in the InLight Center Film and Theatre School,⁵⁷ for a period of about 3 months - starting March 13th and ending on May 19th.

At the start of the pandemic, our acting classes were attended by about 120 adult members. Of these, 70 attended beginners' courses, 30 advanced courses and another 20 worked with directors for theatre performances. The learners were placed in groups of about 8-17 participants and attended school twice a week, for a course of two hours each. With the state of emergency, we switched to online courses and offered free access to all participants. Since we did not have a prior time to adapt to this new approach, we were quite surprised to see the high participation rate in the first 2 weeks.

Unfortunately, the psychological state of the learners gradually deteriorated. In the first week, about 5% of participants complained about being dismissed of their jobs or being warned of the possibility of future layoff measures by the employer. In spite of this, they showed a strong desire to communicate, particularly about the pandemic situation. Although, for the most part, they seemed driven by fear and expressed a desire to expose their lack of confidence in the medical system, to consider conspiracy theories and to seek immediate relief of life-saving solutions, sometimes - in jest (or not) - there were exhortations to "antisocial" behaviours: "let's go out on the streets at night!". It was interesting to note that the pandemic had turned social behaviour into antisocial acts, which is why some trainees felt frustrated by the sudden change of pole.

[learn-from-pre-pandemic-research-to-inform-relief-recovery-and-rebuilding/](#), accessed on 29.12.2020

⁵⁷ Inlight Center is a film and theatre school of non-formal education that also acts as a production company. Founded on November 11, 2011, Inlight Center researches multiple methods to refine the analysis of the scenic process.

“Let’s see each other in the park!” it had become an antisocial act. During classes, both learners and teachers had a tendency to bring up the virus and return with every occasion to the burning topic of the moment.

In the following weeks, the level of attention decreased noticeably from one course to another, and many participants complained about lack of movement; a sense of claustrophobia; bleak, apathetic mood; a loss of interest in participating in their favourite course when in front of the computer. Almost without exception, in the 4th week, all members complained that the number of working hours has increased significantly since they started working online and that they experience panic attacks in recurrent episodes, unexpected intense fear, anxiety or distress, with related physical reactions, without a real danger or apparent cause (myalgia, migraines, generalized physical asthenia, psychogenic pruritus, fatigue, palpitations, sweating, shortness of breath, dizziness). We had several cases of members infected with the new coronavirus who complained of stigma. Nonetheless, the dropout rate continued to be extremely low, which was surprising. Only 2 of the participants dropped out.

Our problem had now become the teacher’s relationship with the courses and the participant. It was wonderful that the participation maintained, but its quality was deteriorated by the pandemic context and, day by day, it began to negatively affect the mood of the course teacher. Teachers noticed a decrease in performance and active involvement in creative activities in the online environment, thus starting to empathize strongly with their disciples and adopt a similar behaviour to theirs. Teachers witnessed the progressive decline in the level of interest, motivation, will.

The members, who suffered from chronic diseases, in total 5, complained of fatigue due to low immunity, secondary to the infectious pathology, and 2 of them withdrew from the 3rd week. Very interesting to analyse were the teenagers who seemed not as

troubled by the whole situation. Most teenagers told us that they did not consider it a tragedy to move their courses online, and their outlook on the future seemed much more positive than that of adults. Still, anxiety seemed to be increasingly prevalent among our participants.

The specialist doctor Liana Grigorescu⁵⁸, a former member of ours, explained to us that anxiety, as an apprehensive anticipation of a danger, is inevitably accompanied by a procession of somatic and psychic manifestations: neuro-vegetative, motor and characteristic behaviours (muscle aches, palpitations, sore throat, shortness of breath, migraines, tachycardia, tremor, dizziness, numbness, chest pain, sweating, concentration and attention disorders, insomnia etc.)⁵⁹. This means that in the presence of these symptoms, we deal with more than a purely psychic phenomenology. Any stressor, in this case -the pandemic-, especially to a vulnerable person, can endanger the existence of any conscious individual who develops anxiety. It gives each individual clinical features and heterogeneous symptomatic nuances in its manifestation, difficult to frame within rigorous nosological limits.

2. Identifying the causes and problems

Anxiety, therefore, seemed to be Zoom's⁶⁰ imaginary friend. We tried to turn our attention, and look for the causes of anxiety in "our own yard" and not that of the virus. I've come to realize that some of the causes were created by the way we approached the course and the clear difference between live and online. I have unexpectedly identified many causes that led to a decrease in the

⁵⁸ Liana Ioan Grigorescu is an Adult Psychiatry Specialist.

⁵⁹ Aurel Romila, Marin Stancu, *Manual de diagnostic și statistică a tulburărilor mentale (DSM - IV-TRm)*, Editura Asociației Psihiatrilor Liberi din România, București, 2003.

⁶⁰ Zoom is a cloud-based video conferencing service that InLight Center used for its online classes.

quality of the courses, but I will list here only 3 of them, as we deem them to be the most important ones.

One of the causes was the relationship between the participant and the space. Most of the partakers had the computer in a corner of the room, or near a wall, or on a couch, behind which was a wall. Practically, the teachers were able to see a small miniature prison. The trainees were moreover seated in a chair, contrary to the way they were used to in normal classes. This kind of positioning in space gives most persons a feeling of clausturation; they cannot move or use their body, because it would no longer fit into the frame, so it would no longer be visible to the teacher and the other participants.

Another problem arose when rehearsing scenes which required the actors to relate to one another. We have often encountered signal delays which accentuated even more the lack of real contact. The trainee felt that he/she could not create a normal relationship with his/her stage-partner, although, in the week when Coronavirus was the main topic of discussion, their relationships were stronger than ever and caused multiple emotions at more than interesting intensities. The learner was trying to create a normal context, a context that obviously became unrealistic when Sonia had to offer Astrov a glass of alcohol, for example.

The third problem is the one for which we've tried to come up with and implement as many solutions as possible: the lack of online tools to create the same lively and interactive context for the participants as before the pandemic. Many of our games could not be adapted to the online context so the participants felt frustrated that they could not play as much as in real space. Romanian non-formal education system is considered relatively more interactive and more focused on cooperation between participants than the formal one, so it became vital for us to be able to keep this criterion alive.⁶¹

⁶¹ Laura Șerbănescu, Mihai Mircescu, Simona Găbureanu, *Pedagogie, Fundamentele pedagogiei. Teoria și metodologia curriculumului*, Politehnica Press, Vol. 1, București, 2015.

3. Solutions and their implementation

First of all, we encouraged the participants to move the device from which he/she was logged in, to a larger room, possibly in the living room, to a place from which almost the entire room is visible. We encouraged them to stand-up for most of the games and to fit in at least in the middle of the plan. We created games for them to interact with their apartment, trying not to go too deep into their privacy. For example: “Bring, within maximum 10 seconds, in front of the camera something blue, something the size of your head and an object received from your mother”. This new positioning also helped them work with their partner. The actors were encouraged to translate their goals into specific actions – “What do you do when you wait for Mitch at home?”. Similarly to how they related on stage, the actors began to fold clothes or tidy up their house (probably left in disorder, because of anxiety.) They also began to use their body, which determined relaxation, decreased intra-psycho anxiety, thus improving mood and reducing anxiety. In the end, the initial fatigue of the online was gradually replaced by a pleasant fatigue, playfulness and general well-being.

In order to solve the problem of the relationship, to which the new positioning in space also positively contributed, we tried to create new texts or modify original texts, so that the action between the two actors is translated online and the sense of reality is increased. As a result, Sonia and Uncle Vania lived in the 21st century Pandemic. Sonia called Vania on Skype and said, “We will live, Uncle Vania. We will live a long, long series of endless evenings”⁶². The impact was so beneficial that the members asked us for homework online. We encouraged them to make self-tapes with monologues and even stage shows, or lip-sync and send them to us. Each of their exercises was subsequently discussed during the course.

⁶² Lines from Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*.

For the third problem, the lack of online tools for a more interactive course, Google Education proved to be of immense help, a platform that we used anyway successfully to manage member accounts and to create course materials and content. After each course, our participants received, in the past, an electronic course support in which we described the concepts taught. We took each course syllabus and their presentations and through Google sheets/slides/docs/forms/drawings and jamboard, we tried to make the learning activities as interactive as the online format could allow. Moreover, we inserted links to direct learners to movies or Ted Talks. We also used Google to receive feedback from our learners and to understand if we succeeded in our approaches to adapt.

As a general conclusion, from a psychiatric/psychological perspective, the pandemic context has been having a profound impact on mental health, especially with the exacerbation of background anxiety, the “de novo” appearance of anxiety or depressive pathologies, exacerbation of chronic mental illnesses etc.⁶³ Anxiety was perhaps one of the most common psychological phenomena that our members faced. It seems to be a common phenomenon not only in clinical practice, but also in normality, being an intrinsic part of both the definition of stress and psycho-emotional distress, generating alarm reactions to any source of threat. Per se anxiety can range in varying degrees from caution, care, alertness, mild anxiety to intense fear. Let’s not forget the lack of socialization, perspectives, fear of illness for loved ones and for many the imposed loneliness. The alarming rumours in the media, the daily figures of the sick, deaths, isolated and fines have become obsessive and accentuate - like it or not - the state of anxiety. Nothing in the online environment will be able to replace in an acting course the uninterrupted direct relations. The outcome is clearly one

⁶³ Karl Jaspers, *General psychopathology*, Johns Hopkins paperbacks ed, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.

that decreases the quality of the learning activities. However, the pandemic context has helped us to discover new activities that we can pick-up, in the future, for members who cannot physically participate for various reasons: vacation, temporary health problems etc. Interestingly, activities that use virtual tools can be used just as well in courses that take place in a normal way. Therefore, the pandemic has had a positive impact on the future of live courses, bringing into play new teaching tools and resources. Our framework objectives have been greatly modified by the current context to the point where new skills have been developed; one example being the ability to use an electronic device effectively. Moreover there was a significant change of the content, which is why I rewrote each course syllabus. For the vast majority, especially for the young people, online schooling was only a rare event if ever necessary, but nowadays it has become a screen filled with faces more often than not carrying sad and gloom expressions exuding anxiety. Yet, dreaming of a vacation, of the reunion with loved ones remains like an anchor in everyday life that sometimes flows dully, awaiting. Sleep becomes difficult while the routine - burdensome and sickening. We've learned to take advantage of any disadvantage, the only frustrating thing remaining is our constant need to be pushed by extreme exterior factors, like a virus, to be forced to create or generate solutions that have long been implemented already in many educational communities around the world.

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