China's Approaches Fighting against COVID-19: Online Learning for Students

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Abstract

In early 2020, almost all schools were closed in China due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article offers a snapshot of China's improvisational approaches of online learning adopted shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the early 2020 with a system-wide policy of "No Lesson Suspended". It captures three major approaches of online learning in the context of such a policy. It is also concluded that online learning has resulted in varied outcomes for students, teachers and parents, which play profound and multidimensional roles in educational equality and quality. Additionally, several hidden challenges are identified for critical reflections on the improvement of online education in the future.

Keywords

In the early 2020 schools closed in more than 190 countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting 1.57 billion K-12 schoolers - 90% of the world's student population. On February 9, nearly 200 million primary and secondary school students in China started their new semester online (UNESCO, 2020, Feb. 19). According to the report by UNESCO (2020, Feb. 19), with all schools closed due to the coronavirus outbreak, China has literally embarked on what might be the largest simultaneous online learning exercise in human history.

1   Major Online Learning Approaches Offered for Students

On Feb. 12, 2020, shortly after China declared the pandemic, the general offices of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology jointly printed and issued the Notice on the Work Arrangement of "No Lesson Suspended", during the Extension of Primary and Secondary Schools to arrange online learning for students (MOE, 2020). Its key goal is to prevent the epidemic from spreading among students as a temporary policy. The other purpose of the policy is to regulate the access to education through remote measures when students are unable to return to classrooms. Under the guidance of the overall epidemic control policy, a mechanism of unified deployment at the provincial level and the implementation of measures to local conditions should be formed. The main measures at the national level include: opening the national network cloud platform for primary and secondary schools; opening a dedicated TV channel; providing free electronic textbooks and resource database. Under the guidance of this policy, the curriculum of primary and secondary schools has been shifted from in-classroom delivery to fully online.

This is a nationwide shift for online education, bringing unprecedented challenges for the entire industry of online education through internet. In this governmental endeavor, the online learning in K-12 in Chinese schools has taken several important approaches.

Livestream Lessons: Some educational enterprises provide free rich contents as a main feature to enable teachers to deliver livestream lessons through their respective platforms. These providers include Ape Question Bank, XRS Online School, Zuo Ye Bang, New Oriental, and Youdao Excellent Course, that have all launched free livestream services of lessons during the epidemic.

Synchronous Lessons: With this approach, teachers prepare videos as learning materials in advance, and students study them within a specified timeframe or according to their individual needs. Students may watch the course videos as they want by required time. Videoclips are broadcasted through cable television networks (National Radio and Television Administration, 2020). Additionally, 27 provinces have opened provincial online learning platforms to provide home-based learning services for students.

Social Media Lessons: Many schools also use popular social media networks in China such as QQ, WeChat and Dingding to implement online teaching. Each major network platform has expanded beyond traditional fields such as video conferencing and social networking to build online classrooms. Dingding, for example, was originally designed as enterprise business

communications and work collaboration software. Now many teachers are using Dingding to record course videos, upload them online, and then guide students. According to the data published on February 12, 2020, over 600,000 teachers and 50 million students have benefited from online classes through Dingding.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDCP) has created a framework for reopening schools, the Technical Implementation Plan for Primary and Secondary Schools (CCDCP, 2020). The framework is divided into three parts: before the school reopens, after the school reopens, and emergency treatments of suspected infection symptoms, with a total of 25 specific guidelines. With the support of multi-dimensional policies and various ways, China's education was carried out in an orderly manner despite the difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2   Challenges and Reflections for Students, Teachers and Parents

For many students, online learning does not endorse the compulsion of traditional in-person instruction. While face-to-face learning in schools is always supervised by teachers, online learning expects students to abide rules and regulations without the traditional way of in-person supervision by teachers. The quality of internet speed, stability and traffic-peak also affects the effectiveness and efficiency of student learning. Some students noted that internet signal and traffic were not always smooth for online classes in the epidemic period, and this was particularly true in rural or remote areas. When internet quality turns bad, so is the learning quality of students, who tend to enjoy free play rather than engage in lessons (China Youth News, 2020).

It has been widely observed that the lack of nonverbal communication in asynchronous discussions, even with the personal use of emojis, easily leads to a lack of trust among students. The inevitable result is reduced participation in class discussions (Sandars, et al., 2020). Distractions abound in virtual classrooms, including the delivery of drinks or fruits by family members, "bullet screen" comments, mobile phone or other computer software messages, etc. Such factors lead teachers to find teaching online to be more laborious than in classrooms (China Youth Network, 2020).

Online learning demands parents of many more responsibilities that are traditionally assigned to teachers, bringing about significant challenges. Many parents are unable to give students necessary guidance and supervision - some of them do not have time due to busy work, and therefore cannot guarantee the equivalent quality of teaching delivered in-person by schools. Some

parents are indeed upset about home education via online platform, manifesting concerns on the health of students, such as intensive time spent on electronic devices.

Online learning is seen by some as an effective way for equity in education, as internet enables more participants to enjoy quality resources of learning. It has become especially urgent under the exceptional circumstance of epidemic prevention and control, but there are also emerging challenges for equality, reflected by such problems as low learning outcomes, low interactions, demanding requirements of internet and electronic devices, student attention, and lack of quality assurance. In addition to the unfairness inherent in classroom environments and school organizations, the scope of educational inequality has appeared increased during the pandemic in China.

While some insist that online learning makes education more equitable – driven by this pandemic, its implementation has resulted in serious inequality in education, such as students from poor families in less developed regions committing suicide because they suffered severe shortage of demanded devices. In remote areas, some primary school students have to travel a long way to where they can receive sufficient internet signals.

These challenges demand policymakers and implementers of reflections on whether online learning alleviates or exacerbates unequal education through online approaches. Some providers in the business of e-learning illustrate that online learning is confined by the availability of devices and infrastructure for internet provision, asking whether there is a threshold of equal participations and success in online education. It is thus imperative to prioritize policy shifted toward the disadvantaged student groups and regional communities.

While the epidemic has fundamentally changed the life of human beings, it has also significantly impacted learning and teaching, and accelerated the transformation of classrooms and schools, as well as pedagogies catering for online learning and teaching. According to Zhu Yongxin, member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of China Association for Promoting Democracy, this pandemic has brought about new opportunities for educational improvements in China, and developing new and equitable educational approaches become imperative (China Education Daily, 2020, May 28). As a powerful new way, online learning and teaching are emerging during the pandemic, providing all kinds of learning spaces and possibilities for people of all ages and backgrounds. Although the routine, face-to-face teaching has gradually returned to normal in China, as an efficient and versatile tool of communications, the improvement of online learning and teaching is designated as a global trend in education.

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