**Online learning, through the lens of Plato: Stories from Italy**

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*"I started on March 2nd, immediately, posting a recorded lesson: it was the first of my life. It took me a whole night to understand how the tool worked. All of the children had flourishing faces, connecting from their homes. I looked like a zombie, with dark circles under my eyes. And they asked me: "What's wrong? What's up?" I didn't want to say anything, but then I spent 20 days without ever going to bed. Now I'm Superwoman!"*

*"Technology is supporting us very much, and it is allowing us to breathe in the emotions of our students' faces and voices through it. Who would have thought that technology could also mean perception, feeling, relationship that goes beyond the usual patterns…"*
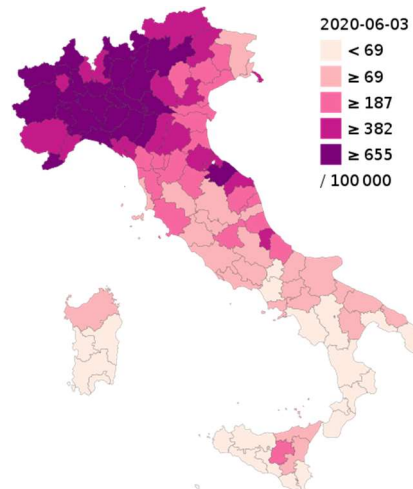


*COVID-19 outbreak Italy per capita cases (source Wikimedia commons)*

In Italy, school closures due to COVID-19 began on February 21 in the 12 towns first hit by the virus. In the following weeks, these and other restrictions were extended to a significant portion of the northern region. On March 9, the government mandated the closure of all Italian schools and on March 10 the entire country went on lockdown. Citizens were not allowed to leave the house except for essential reasons.

Schools were taken by surprise. Most of them, in the first week, beat about the bush hoping the lockdown would be temporary and they would be allowed to go back to normal soon. The week after, it became clear that normalcy would be far away and so some of them (data are not yet available about how many, when and to what extent) started finding solutions to reach out to their students and "school won't stop", became a popular motto.

Witnessing to the speed-of-light change that took place, from the privileged position of director / co-director of two masters devoted to innovative education, was mind-blowing.

In the immediate aftermath of the crisis outburst, we set up three emergency initiatives: a MOOC on remote teaching (extracted from one of the two master degree programs) to which more than 3,600 teachers (K-12) enrolled; a blog for quick and effective exchange of methodological strategies for teaching online; a series of weekly "flipped-webinars" to which more than 500 teachers took part. The webinars were flipped in the sense that attendees were asked, one week before, what questions they would want to be answered and the webinars' content steered accordingly.

The sequence of the "hot" topics, which rapidly evolved on a weekly basis, was this: shall we really go online? What platform can we use? What strategies/apps can we use to involved the kids? How can we perform remote assessment? And eventually – this is the new black now – what shall we do next year?

All these experiences helped us highlight some issues that we deem can be considered general and not restricted to the Italian situation and that for sure will need to be tackled in the near future (in which, it is clear now, we won't be back to normal as we knew it).

1. The **different attitudes and reactions by the teachers**. In our perception, teachers reacted according to Rogers' curve of innovation adoptions, ranging from those ready to embrace the novelty to those who did not. Our initiatives allowed us to monitor most of the categories of innovation adopters, from the tech-enthusiasts who thought that finally their moment had come to the ones who had to cope with what they would have gladly done without, except the **"teachers left behind"**, whose voices were poorly heard. There has been a lot of talk already about how the virus has exacerbated inequalities on the students' side. Little or nothing has been said on inequalities on the teachers' side. Many teachers were not only not ready but not *keen* on teaching with technologies, were caught off guard by the situation, struggled to keep up – unwillingly – or did not even try.

2. The **debate on "traditional" teaching/learning as opposed to online learning**. A mantra was to be heard, saying that "of course, nothing compares to traditional teaching/learning, but having to cope with the situation there is no other choice". This made me think of Plato who, in the Phaedrus, discusses the damages brought about by the invention of writing and states that the only real way of teaching, the only valuable "word", is the one "which is written with intelligence in the mind of the learner" in a face-to-face relationship (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276a). Let me be clear: I agree with Plato 100%. But can we afford it? History has shown us that writing turned out to be an effective technology for teaching/learning. I therefore believe that we should have, towards the technologies available today that knock at the door of our classroom, an attitude at the crossroad between "let's make the best of them" and "inevitably, they will find their way in", keeping the educational effectiveness as polar star not to be stranded by tech-glamour and thus make wise choices.

3. **The added value of not only showing up at school** (see the post by Gary Stager, May 1 2020, in this blog) **but of showing up online.** I personally think this is something we should think about even without a pandemic to remind us and that the fully online version of our schooling (where students can chat via WhatsApp with their friends while a boring history class goes on) makes even more cogent. And this is where, probably, Plato comes again into play. What of the original, heart-to-heart, relationship can we keep in a classroom where the ratio teacher-student can range between 1 to 15 to 1 to 250 (at higher education level)? What of it can we save during an online lesson? Trying to turn the lesson into a two-ways communication channel is the challenge.



Italian teachers shared with us their (amazing, fun and moving) stories on how they coped with the pandemic in the frame of our MOOC. They are collected in an eBook (Voices from Italian school at the time of the Coronavirus), available on the Google store and on the Apple store, for free.

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