Looking in the Post-Covid Crystal Ball: Utopian and Dystopian Possibilities for Dubai Private Schools Offering Synchronous Blended Learning

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented change and rapid adaptation within the education sector. Like many other countries, schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have had to respond to this rapid change with very little time or preparation. This paper focuses on the situation in private schools located in Dubai, UAE as they move forward from the initial pivot to emergency online learning towards new variants of blended and hybrid learning. Using a collaborative speculative fiction framework to describe two contrasting scenarios, characterized as dystopian and utopian, the authors consider these possible futures from the perspective of wellbeing, assessment, curriculum, educator qualities and pedagogy. While recognizing the opportunities that the increasing use of educational technology provides, the authors also caution with regard to the increasing normalization of surveillance and trust embodied in algorithmic technologies. The use of speculative fiction futures allows the exploration of these contrasting possibilities. The authors argue that the experience and feedback of teachers and students should not be neglected as education further adapts to the new educational realities.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented change and rapid adaptation within the education sector. Like many other countries, schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have offered distance learning to students. Schools physically reopened in September 2020, but with many safety precautions in place. Since many parents and students still had concerns about the growing number of Covid-19 cases during this reopening phase (Sicar, 2020) many private schools in Dubai offered a 'blended' approach which would give families the choice of attending their lessons face to face or online. The majority of schools

have offered lessons synchronously with teachers delivering the same content to both in-class and online learners at the same time.

Blended learning is a contested term in education that can refer to multiple different variations of face-to-face and online learning. According to Butz et al. (2014, p.213), "technology-enriched learning environments have been variously termed; virtual, distributed, remote, blended, e-learning, web-enhanced, Internet-based, and hybrid". The style of blended learning which has been adopted by Dubai private schools, and the definition we will be using for this paper, incorporates a simultaneous delivery of content by teachers to learners present both in class and online. Hastie et al. (2010) make the distinction of referring to this style of teaching as a synchronous blended classroom. Private schools in Dubai have been under massive pressure to ensure that the blended learning they are offering is up to the standards required to justify their fees, while also making budgetary adjustments to stay afloat during the uncertainty of the pandemic (Masuid, 2020).

In this paper, we present two contrasting progressions from this pivotal point, both utopian and dystopian futures for Dubai private schools in the form of speculative fiction. According to Dunne & Raby (2013), the fictional worlds we are most interested in are not just for entertainment but for "reflection, critique, provocation, and inspiration" (p.70). Both of the hypothetical futures are intended to illustrate the inspirational possibilities but also provocative pitfalls that blended learning can contribute to. They are purposely exaggerated, as the idea of utopia is far more interesting when used as a stimulus to keep idealism alive and somewhere to aim for rather than build (ibid.). However, most private schools in Dubai, and around the world, will fall somewhere between the utopian and dystopian futures, with many elements already familiar to teachers offering blended learning.

Utopian Future

"We are delighted to introduce our new leader of digital pedagogy" the Principal announced. As a result of such inspired leadership, effective blended synchronous learning is the norm in your school. Many of your online attendees originally remained at home because of concerns around the pandemic but some have settled into this way of learning in a permanent capacity. This includes students who have a long commute to school, those with special needs who struggle to negotiate the social hurdles of a school day, as well as those who simply prefer to access the content at their own pace and in the comfort of their homes.

Effective blended learning has also expanded your school's catchment area well outside its previous reach. Students are attending online from nearby cities as well as distant countries. The school's innovative 'digital open days' are attracting potential customers

from all over the world. Their 'Try Before You Buy' invitations to your open, online lessons have allowed curious parents and students to experience the inclusive ethos in bite-sized chunks before enrollment. Your students are accessing a truly international curriculum in a globalized blended classroom environment with contributions from learners both locally and thousands of miles away.

You have avoided techno-stress with the help of a technical support team to deal with issues outside of your pedagogical realm. The school is now paperless so marking and feedback is provided in soft copy, which greatly reduces time wasted at the printer and the once large carbon footprint of the school. What seemed like a mammoth task in moving to entirely blended learning has proved to be seamless as a result of continued financial, emotional and technological investment in you as an educator by the school.

Utopian Discussion

Empirical studies on blended learning have reported high levels of wellbeing for students who would otherwise struggle to attend lessons in person. In a study by Hastie et al. (2010) on the Brisbane School of Distance Education, students in a trial group were unable to access a physical school for various reasons including geographical isolation, special educational needs, medical exemption and family commitments. Some lived overseas as expatriates in a range of locations including Asia, Europe, and the USA. Issues such as physical isolation and costs associated with traditional distance education modes resulted in limited communication with their teacher and their school. Through access to the synchronous blended teaching, students who had traditionally "been 'under-serviced' gained direct access to their teacher, their school community, and wider social networks" (p.18). However, approximately 60% of teachers in Dubai private schools believe that students with special needs are not being supported enough in distance learning (Erfurth & Ridge, 2020). To achieve the utopia described above, it is essential that schools support teachers who have addressed this as a concern by allowing for additional contact time when necessary but without overloading the teachers already packed timetables.

Assessment and student progress does not seem to be hindered by the blended learning approach. Multiple studies cite no major differences in student achievement when compared with traditional learning (White et al., 2010; Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2008; Hall & Villareal, 2015). Additional research has associated blended courses with improved pupil performance (Brunner, 2006), as well as increased student involvement, positive perceptions, and achievement (Antonoglou, Charistos, & Sigalas, 2011).

The aforementioned possibilities of students attending schools from different cities and countries does not seem to be hindered by achievement in distance learning. However, the majority of literature on distance and blended learning is limited to higher education, in which older students possess better agency and digital literacy. While the literature would

suggest that assessment will not be affected, more support may be required for those in primary and secondary schools to navigate high-stakes assessments at home. Taking the demographics of Dubai, many students are part of large families who may not have the luxury of quiet spaces at home. Half of parents surveyed by Erfurth & Ridge (2020) reported that their children have to share a room as they engage in distance learning. They reported that "for parents with limited space and time, as well as for their children, remote working in combination with distance learning at the same time has proved to be an immense challenge" (p.11). These considerations, along with others around monitoring students taking assessments to prevent cheating or malpractice, must all be considered before effective blended learning can take place.

In order to achieve the international enrollment of students described above, schools would need to offer an international curriculum that can be taught successfully in a blended style. According to Gaskell (2019), global higher education student mobility is at an all-time high and will continue to grow. In the last 18 years, the number of international schools has risen from 2,584 to 10,282. Fee income has also risen significantly from $4.9 billion to $49.9 billion. The UAE is second only to China in the number of international schools by country but has by far the highest enrollment in international schools. Given the population difference between the UAE and China, this means that there is an incredible draw for international education in the UAE, one that can be further met by successful implementation of blended or distance learning with the potential to now 'poach' students from nearby and abroad.

To accommodate local as well as international students, a far more flexible and innovative pedagogical approach would be required by teachers. They would need to facilitate scenarios where students can interact synchronously but also provide alternate options for those contributing from different time zones. Teachers will need to move away from traditional class periods and set timings to a more fluid approach to learning. Blended learning enables this sort of flexible environment that reinforces the student's autonomy, reflection, and power of research (Tam, 2000). Live lessons combined with technologies such as blogs, journals, and discussion boards in a learning management system can increase opportunities for students to receive diverse opinions and feedback from classmates and the teacher (Tseng & Walsh, 2016). This kind of asynchronous communication and reflection is no longer limited by in-class time constraints and can be ongoing as long as there are new inputs. According to Ho, Lu & Thurmaier (2006), additional modes of communication and participation can lead to an increase in student motivation. If students have a higher level of independence in the learning process, it can help them to build confidence and satisfaction. With the correct pedagogical leaders in place, blended learning can provide a platform for forming an international learning network in which students are autonomous and drivers in their own learning journeys.

Dystopian Future

It is 6pm and after one final check of learning platforms and messaging applications, your laptop closes for the first time since 7am. Throughout your commute home, your consciousness flicks to autopilot as doubts and questions preoccupy your mind; 'what if Hamdan's Dad tells my Head of Department that I am behind on marking?' Like so many other teachers, the fear of slipping up and potentially losing your income is never far from your mind. You hope that Aliyah's tearful confession about how she was afraid of Mum's new partner was not audible during today's live-streamed lesson. You worry that Ricardo, on the angst-fueled cusp of adolescence, like many of your students, has shown greatly reduced social skills from hours of interaction exclusively through backlit screens.

It is becoming clear that the divide between your in-class and online students grows wider each day. Some of your online learners are struggling enough as it is from their poor internet connections without the added obstacle of social exclusion from their peers. You can't help worrying about the portfolios you are creating online. Each day new photographs are uploaded of students and their work. How is the storage, sale and use of their data regulated?

Dystopian Discussion

For staff supporting classroom students and distance learners simultaneously, managing workload remains a challenge (Zaman, 2020). Despite many young people now growing up in a world of digital technology, integrating these into classroom practice raises a number of challenges and concerns among educators (Daniels et al., 2019). Hofmann (2018, p.23) expands on this by suggesting that blended learning is expensive when it comes to "time, technology investments, development costs, and administration", therefore, lessons and activities offered online should be carefully considered. Perhaps now is the right time to critically reflect on content objectives and ensure that we do not align with the views of many educators who insist that drudgery is a necessary part of learning; "if it's not worth a teacher reading the assignment/ assessment, then it's not worth the student writing it" (Watters, 2020).

There appears to be a widening gap between the skills we teach in schools and those which we require, in order for children to learn in an increasingly digital world; "It is possible that for educational technologies to have more of an impact on teaching and learning, curriculum documentation should address this" (Jack & Higgins, 2019, p.14). In one study which explored technology in early years settings, it was found that whilst 52% of educators thought technology was essential in this context, only 28.7% thought that it was necessary to support the curriculum (Jack & Higgins, 2019). Educators should begin to

implement "developmentally appropriate technology-related activities and opportunities" from an early age in order to prepare them for life in modern society and also to deepen their creative problem solving and thinking skills (Izumi-Taylor, 2008, p.14). This need is unfortunately not currently reflected in many curricula, which view digital technology simply as a tool for achieving goals in other subjects (Daniels et al., 2019). Schools must move forward in terms of students' practical, transferable and overarching skills. "It is time to re-think our task as practitioners and researchers in digital education, not viewing ourselves as the brokers of 'transformation', or 'harnessers' of technological power, but rather as critical protagonists in wider debates on the new forms of education, subjectivity, society and culture worked-through by contemporary technological change" (Bayne, 2014, p.16).

Educational settings must recognize that appropriate methods of assessment and pedagogy vary, depending on the age and needs of individuals; "Blended learning design is not a one-size-fits-all recipe" (Hofmann, 2018, p.33). Professional ethics, personal confidence in digital tools and leaderships' awareness of proposed technology play a role in the success of blended schemes of work. An example of such is discussed in Watters' (2020) insight into proctoring applications. "It is simply shocking how students and teachers from all over the world have simultaneously started to heedlessly pump their data into these sites and platforms. How much? Where and with who is all this aggregated data going to end up and for what reason?" (Lossec, Millar, Curcher & Teräs, 2020). These questions echo similar thoughts to those of Selwyn (2014, p.15) when he asks educators; "What organizational cultures have formed around the use of data within educational settings, and with what outcomes?". As educators and leaders, our role should now include critically analyzing the suitability of digital tools, in terms of considering their usefulness versus their unnecessary surveillance and data harvesting; "ClassDojo's datafying system of school discipline is intensifying and normalizing the surveillance of students, and serving as a mechanism for behavior control" (Manolev, Sullivan & Slee, 2018, p.13).

Both pedagogical and technical training are now a necessity; "educators should know how to implement technology in their programs and how to develop technological literacy for their charges as well as for themselves" (Izumi-Taylor, 2008, p.14). Individuals should be encouraged to take a more proactive role in regards to their professional development needs as opposed to a passive or blanket approach which is dependent on the direction of management. Connecting to wider networks of professionals outside the organization should be encouraged as this will broaden the horizons of even the smallest communities (Hofmann, 2018).

A reflective but "open-ended and exploratory" approach is needed when implementing any scheme of work which is built upon children's digitally mediated activity (Daniels et al.,

2019, p.10). Learner engagement is crucial to the success of any curricular initiative and is based on three factors: Emotion, Intellect and Environment (Dye, 2016 in Hofmann, 2018). It is suggested that, particularly in the case of 'instructionally complex' blended classrooms, "rushing through the design process at any point could readily result in a failure" and cause learners to disengage from the course (Hofmann, 2018, p.33). Students should have opportunities to "play and work together in a group-oriented environment through technology-related activities in order to promote their social and emotional development" (Izumi-Taylor, 2008, p.13). When these components elements are limited in synchronous online classrooms, it diminishes both the student-teacher and also peer relationships; "More often teachers were found less motivated to engage in a deeper-level of social interactions with the distant students" (Zuo, Yan, Wang & Luo, 2020, p.10).

Conclusion

The current trend for distance learning in schools presents many opportunities for students and businesses. The potential for development in the field of education in general is equally vast. Mertala (2019, p.6) states that; "it is up to the schools to standardize students' digital skills and promote equal opportunities for societal participation". Educators should be mindful however, of the cost of normalizing surveillance and investing an unscrupulous amount of trust in technology. Watters (2020) claims that with or without the pandemic, human decision-making is increasingly being replaced by that of an algorithm. The time is upon us to shape the future of a critically reflective educational landscape.

It should also be reiterated that much of the literature used in this study focuses on higher education as this is where most studies have focused prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. We recommend that school leaders make use of this body of literature, but make allowances for younger students. Decisions made quickly in a response to the pandemic must also be reviewed continually so that temporary solutions do not become permanent policy. We recommend that schools move towards a more fluid school day which allows more flexibility and freedom in how students engage with the content and teachers. Schools may also want to consider face-to-face or online lessons for some groups depending on ability and individual needs.

As we continue to adapt to these current challenges in teaching, it seems that synchronous blended learning is far more than a passing trend and will play a key role moving forward post Covid-19. While the utopian and dystopian futures described may be unlikely for most schools, it is our hope that school leaders are aware of these possibilities and make informed decisions in how they create their 'new normal' to achieve some of the goals we have hypothesized and avoid most of the pitfalls described. Although presented as fiction in this paper, the purpose of speculation is to "unsettle the present rather than predict the future" (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p.88). This framework was adopted to illuminate the

complex challenges of blended synchronous learning and present schools with an optimistic realm of future possibilities provided the correct action is taken. This will not happen by using a crystal ball, but by listening to and acting upon feedback from teachers who have successfully navigated from in-class, to online, to now synchronously blended teaching.

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