



Digital technology and BC education

Underlying issues revealed by COVID-19

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COVID-19 has put the issue of technology front and centre in Canadian public education. Teachers across the country have quickly adapted instruction to online formats to provide ‘continuity of learning’ for their students, while tending to their own family and personal needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rushing to put materials online and teach remotely in the context of a global health pandemic is not the same as the careful, time-consuming process of creating online courses or activities. Nonetheless, the current public health crisis is illuminating BC teachers’ longstanding experiences with technological inequity, work intensification and the increasing commodification of public education by the growing ‘ed-tech’ industry.

Technological inequities exposed

The system-wide move to remote learning has exposed and exacerbated existing social inequity among students and families in BC. The longstanding lack of access to reliable and

up-to-date technology in schools and homes across BC has become more visible in the context of COVID-19. Prior to the current health crisis, many teachers found themselves forging along without reliable internet access in their schools, struggling to secure enough laptops, tablets, computer lab time and tech support to meet “21st century learning” outcomes. In the face of such tech shortages, some school districts have opted for ‘bring your own device’ policies, which in practice put the onus on individual families to make up for what is not — but should be — provided to all students. These inequities have been reinforced since the shift online back in March of this year. Not all BC families have access to reliable internet at home and this is especially the case in rural communities across the province. Not all students have their own personal devices or a quiet space to study. In many homes, parents and children are sharing one computer. Not all children can easily self-direct their learning at home — especially younger children — and not all parents are able to spend time helping their children with at-home learning. Not to

mention those families who don't have a home to do 'at-home' learning in. These inequities are resulting in less 'continuity of learning' for some students — despite teachers' best efforts. This results in some students being more easily able to continue their learning while others struggle to access and work through home activities prepared by their teachers — and potentially widening the gap for when they return to the classroom.

Digital Technology and the 24/7 Teacher

Digital learning platforms, online assessment and reporting tools, along with email as the key form of communication, are supposed to make teachers' work easier as well as facilitate more direct communication with parents and students. While there are many positive aspects to increased communication, the not so talked about reality is that teachers' workdays have become longer as the boundary of 'work' and 'home' increasingly blurs. Many teachers find themselves answering emails from parents and students at home after school hours (late evening, during weekends) and even on vacation. It's worth noting that as a profession comprised mostly of women, this urge to be available and ready to respond to any email from a parent or student at any time is also but is part of a broader, longstanding societal and cultural expectation that sees teaching as a "philanthropic vocation or a romantic calling" for women¹. In the challenge to balance the "anywhere, anytime" features of online platforms and communications with their care for students and the need to maintain a reasonable work-life balance, teachers have been struggling to establish reasonable 'digital work hours' for themselves. COVID-19 has further blurred any work-home separation, as many

teachers are balancing teaching remotely and being attentive to their students' emotional and mental health needs during this crisis while also caring for their family members (including children, partners, elders, and extended family) as well as themselves.

The increasing commercialization of public education

The past decade has seen the growth of a multi-billion-dollar global education technology market where big tech giants like Google and Microsoft as well as venture

capitalist funded ed-tech start-ups promise to 'transform' education through 'personalised learning', tailored to each individual student's needs and interests. Seeing teachers, school administrators and students as consumers of education products, ed-tech companies are providing increasingly greater educational services to schools and students. For example, Google and Microsoft have ensured that their platforms — Google Suite for Education and Microsoft Teams — are 'one-stop shops' for delivering online educational experiences. The COVID-19 crisis has created an enormous marketing and profit-making opportunity for global ed-tech companies as entire school systems across the world have had to suddenly make the shift online and use large-scale digital platforms and services to deliver all aspects of education. While many ed-tech services and platforms are 'free' for teachers and students (and many more have become so during this pandemic), teachers are asking: "What is this really costing us? How do we know that companies are not mining student data?" Profit-driven companies don't offer 'free' services just for the sake of it. Moreover, across Canada and the US, insufficient protocols are in place to protect student and teacher data. Recent "zoombombing" incidents on the video conferencing platform Zoom, which is used across many BC school districts, further illustrate concerns about privacy and security.

Classroom as community: Relationships, social interaction and engagement

The move to remote learning during this pandemic has been wrought with challenges and teachers, parents and students have been doing their best to make the current situation work. COVID-19 has forced a re-evaluation of the importance of face-to-face learning, illustrating the indispensable role of teachers in students' educational journeys, and of schools as communities of care, connection, and socialization. As one BC teacher reflected on their experience with remote learning during this crisis, "The biggest and most important change with these two contexts [at home vs. at school] is the disconnection. The physical and temporal distance. When we spend 6 hours a day together in one place, we are bound by micro traumas, by micro celebrations, by the mundane and extraordinary of daily existence".

While some integral aspects of the educational experience just cannot be replicated or replaced online, it's important to keep in mind that for some students, engaging in an online

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platform can provide different opportunities for participation. As one Grade 5 teacher noted, for some of their very quiet and shy students, virtual learning has “enabled them to feel more confident to share their learning and reflect a personality with me on camera...this tool can enable some to feel more confident to express themselves without holding back.” The key takeaway is that what makes a meaningful educational experience is social interaction and connection between teachers and students, as well as amongst classroom peers. Technology that is used as a supplementary to enhance the relational aspect of education is what has

been most impactful. As we prepare for what education will look like after this health crisis, let’s keep this lesson in mind. ●

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Notes

1. Goldstein, D. (2014). *The Teacher Wars: A History of America’s Most Embattled Profession*. New York: Penguin Random House.