



The Corona Challenge to Higher Education

PETER MAYO

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1. Affiliazione Autore / Authors' information

University of Malta, Malta

2. Contatti / Authors' contact

Peter Mayo: peter.mayo[at]um.edu.mt

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Note of Editor-in-Chief

This is the first Special issue of the journal *Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc*. The idea behind the special issue comes from this consideration: around the world, individuals are facing a critical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences require some reflections on many topics, often forgotten by scholars. This is the reason why many Italian and foreign scholars have been invited to give their contribution. Furthermore, now more than ever, it is crucial to share knowledge coming from multiple disciplines and that's why it was decided to write an entire issue in English.

For scientific and intellectual correctness, the contents of single articles refer to the situation as in mid-May 2020. It is necessary to clarify that because this Special issue was published when many countries were starting to reduce their emergency measures to cope with the pandemic.

The Corona Challenge to Higher Education

Peter Mayo

University of Malta, Malta
E-mail: peter.mayo@um.edu.mt

Abstract

Covid-19 poses a number of challenges to Higher Education. It has turned the day to day world of academic life on its head. University alternatives offer tenured academics a relatively safe adjustment to the changed scenario in stark contrast to other people for whom the current situation presents a choice: exposure or starvation. Precarious academics working part-time and according to definite contracts and students coming from humble backgrounds also face problems in this age of Corona. Furthermore, within the relatively safe 'middle class' context of secluded and virtually-mediated academic work and transaction, there are still issues to be considered bearing in mind the future of Higher Education itself.

Keywords: Academia, Precariat, Social Class, Ethnicity, Virtual Learning, Blended Learning, Community, Study-environment.

Introduction: Phantom city?

Higher education is constantly being exposed to several challenges in this day and age. The Covid-19 pandemic has offered a series of challenges which have plunged many in the academic community, tenured/non-tenured faculty and students alike, into modes of delivery and interaction, that differ considerably from the hitherto established norm. As I will argue in this paper, University alternatives offer academics a relatively safe adjustment to the changed scenario (some have been attuned to this for quite some time before the outbreak) in contrast to other people for whom the current situation presents a choice: exposure or starvation. Even within the relatively safe 'middle class' context of secluded and virtually-mediated academic work and transaction, there are issues to be considered with regard to the future of Higher Education itself.

Desperate attempts to curtail the spread of the Corona Virus are said to have been turning many localities in different parts of the world into seemingly phantom cities. For some this is a spectre of an 'unreal city'. For others it lays bare the clear and unadulterated design of the city itself, city centre or square. There are those who hailed city vistas, including open spaces, as 'things of beauty' untrammelled by such paraphernalia as ticket booths, market stalls, coffee tables, chairs and umbrellas. Others underline the eeriness of the site – a setting in which strange matters can unfold and which fuels the imagination.

1. University, middle class jobs and the class/ethnic divide

University and other higher education campuses have not been immune to this process. They are 'closed' institutions with administration reduced to skeleton staff and academics urged to seek alternative ways of interacting with students. As Donatella della Porta underlined in a Facebook remark, middle class work allows

for such contingencies as being able to work from home, a possibility not allowed to many working class and certain service-oriented middle class professionals, the latter, I would add, including medical doctors, nurses and pharmacists. “The pandemic has complicated the class divide, by singling out a privileged class of those who can work from home in a secure labour condition.¹” (Della Porta, 2020). She raises an important sociological question for those engaged in exploring the nature of class stratification in this day and age: “...who is producing and distributing all those products that keep those who can [be] comfortable at home...”? (Ibid.) We might therefore argue that these centres in the city and adjacent streets are not as barren as certain pictures shown on the social media and newspapers would have us believe. There are moments when they are full of people scampering around as their livelihood depends on this. This is a time when abuse and exploitation of those engaged in the informal economy, necessary in certain countries or regions to keep the formal economy afloat, reach an unprecedented level (Borg, 2020). The ‘realm of necessity’ has not receded into the background for certain people. There can be mental health issues arising from living in a restricted room or two, or outside sleeping under cardboard covers, in shacks or beneath bridges (Rosa Luxemburg’s most tangible form of ‘barbarism’ today) – all this in contrast to the palatial settings of certain dwelling places.

This in effect represents a demarcation with regard to those who can work safely and continue to live and survive the virus and those who have had their odds on doing so lengthened. Social class and, I would add, ethnicity become important variables in the chances of overcoming or succumbing to the virus, especially in the area of menial and intermittent, often clandestine, work carried out by immigrants especially undocumented immigrants. One would have to add here the intersections of social class, ethnicity, gender, citizenship/non-citizenship (including *sans papiers*) and age. Elderly people without help or assistance and living on their own are particularly vulnerable in this regard, and one has to see how older adulthood intersects with many of the other variables.

The choice for these is between exposure and starvation; and people who have risked the vagaries of the desert, the anarchic state of Libya and the ocean, are most likely to be ready to risk exposure to the virus. Some were less fortunate as the pretext of Corona prevented their hitherto resilient bodies from entering Southern European ports, a number succumbing to the fatality of dehydration or drowning – a sad and tragic end to a brave but doomed saga. This is compounded by the stubbornness of uncompromising governments intent on forcing a bigoted, self-interest driven European Union to share in the responsibility of taking migrants. At a time when a pandemic increases the call for cooperation and compassion, giving the lie to Maggie Thatcher’s mantra “There is no such thing as society”, there are those who persist in a ‘dog eat dog’ mentality. Self-interest lies at the heart of not only individuals, under neo-liberalism, but nation states as a whole.²

¹ Retrived from <https://www.facebook.com/donatella.dellaporta>. She reminded me, through personal correspondence, that not all ‘smart work’ is ‘middle class’ and not all ‘middle class’ work can be carried out from home.

² So much for the so-called receding of the nation state through the intensification of globalisation (Mayo, 2019)

2. All into proper perspective

All this is to place the travails of Higher Education, in the time of Corona, into proper perspective. In many respects, universities are privileged places. Of course there are some noticeable exceptions: students surviving the fees regime and other Higher Education conditions by the skin of their teeth, living in crowded spaces where the tranquillity of online learning and home study in general is a luxury 'devoutly to be wished' but difficult to realise - all this assuming that they can afford a computer and its accessories, some, at best, sharing one computer among several family members.³ There is then the case of adjunct faculty often paid at piece rate. They cannot benefit from the time and space afforded their full time colleagues for research as they are overburdened by excessive teaching and marking loads. Some need to juggle university teaching with other jobs. Adjunct faculty, working in precarious conditions, are an increasing feature of contemporary Higher Education in many parts of the world - the first casualties of crises-induced cuts. This is how the post-1968 mass university or HE institution copes with increasing student numbers.

These are important considerations that have to be taken on board when exploring Higher education alternatives during Corona and after. My guess and fear is that all this will continue to be given short shrift. Higher Education, and especially university education, by and large still accommodates a middle class viewpoint. Despite laudable and interesting experiments among peasants in Latin America⁴ (Santos, 2017; Connell, 2019; Mayo 2019; Mayo and Vittoria, 2017) and also in Western Europe (Neary, 2014, Earl, 2016), the institution as we conventionally know it, and in which most academics work, remains a bourgeois institution with an unmistakably bourgeois ethos. Many institutions have come a long way since the exclusive and exclusionary days of old, though the few elite bastions that survive and thrive on endowments, elite residues from that period, persist in their social selection - your *Grandes écoles* and Oxbridge colleges. The general ethos, however, as with the whole competitive educational ethos, remains what it was when we were undergrads. What follows therefore can come across as carping by a relatively privileged commentator. And yet there are issues to be raised with regard to these institutions' future, the epistemological foundations of the knowledge they promote (Santos, 2017) and their chances of engaging wider communities (Walcott, 2020), in short their greater, genuine democratisation.

2.1. Standard Corona Response

During this period of Covid-19, academics have been urged, if not compelled, irrespective of their training for this purpose, to place their courses and carry out their teaching online. This has led many to herald the 'brave new world' of online learning as the panacea for the crisis. There are those who would consider the present period as the potential watershed in establishing this already widely practiced mode of delivery as the dominant form of teaching in Higher Education. This reaction, couched in phrases such as "every cloud has a silver lining", is to be expected and falls in line with the neoliberal tenets that have been underlying most

³ Indebted to students in my University of Malta MA Adult Education class ACA5001 for this point.

⁴ These include higher education institutions connected with social movements as is the Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandez connected with the Landless peasant movement (MST) in Brazil and the UNITIERRA in Chiapas, Mexico.

common sense thinking about mass-oriented Higher Education. I argue for caution in this regard.

The history of education is full of episodes when necessity, through crises in the form of occupation, led to ingenuity. Under Nazi occupation, Polish universities went underground; material moved from one place to another. This echoed the earlier 'flying university' of the Partition period, when Marie Curie (Puiu, 2020) and Janusz Korczak were among the students. It was innovative and attested to the resilience of the Polish academic community (students and professors) involved. It resurfaced when Poland was under Soviet control.

The present crisis makes those who are resistant to modern digitally-mediated technology take the plunge, whether adequately trained for this purpose or not. Many academics from Greece, Italy, Cyprus and the UK revealed that online learning is a new experience foisted on unprepared academics. It might enable them to transcend archaic ways. It is common knowledge that most universities throughout the world have placed their courses and are delivering their teaching online. Some universities already had adequate preparation for this as a good percentage of their students are distance learning students. It is likely that the teachers involved have had adequate training. A former tutor at the UK's Open University, which backs distance learning with a variety of other approaches, including tutorials carried out by academics ensconced in different parts of the country, spent a year's preparation period before joining the university staff. The present crisis however recalls, in certain cases, the situation during the immediate post-revolution literacy campaigns in Latin America and elsewhere when young literacy workers were rushed to the field without adequate preparation (Arnove, 1986).

This mass scale online learning approach can have the same effect. It can extend beyond a crisis response as the institution begins to see the lucrative side of it, a means of spreading one's net far and wide. Now it would be foolish to overlook online learning's positive aspects reaching communities at the furthest remove from universities and centres. It reaches communities with problems of physical access and time.

Once the dust settles, however, will there be space for critical reflection regarding how technologically-mediated delivery complements what is good about 'face to face' delivery and adequate teacher-student human interaction? It is claimed that online learning can address mass students anywhere and at any time throughout the world. Academic staff, therefore, really need to think about the appropriate pedagogical approach to take and how to use most modern technology in appropriate ways. Development of good learning environments requires specialist skills and is a team effort based on collaboration between academics, communities and learning designers. There is also the danger of surveillance especially when the sessions are recorded ostensibly for the benefit of those who could not gain access in real time. The fear of recordings and of outside parties gaining access to the conversations might make participants hesitant to talk freely in the virtual classroom sessions, especially foreign students hailing from countries abroad with a poor track record when it comes to human rights and civil liberties. They would fear the extent, real or imaginary, of the home country's intelligence operations.

To what extent is online learning part of the blended approach which reserves space for different forms of interaction including human to human and human to earth interaction? The push for a lucrative share of the global education market can easily make institutions forget the 'face to face' aspect of the blended learning approach. Meanwhile elite schools continue to enjoy a monopoly in the latter type of university learning.

2.2. *Consumer Product or Public Good?*

How do we strike a happy medium between online and ‘face to face’ teaching? Will online learning continue to drag higher education further along the business route (Giroux, 2014)⁵ or will it play its part in an overall conception of education as a public good? And if it is to be part of education as a public good, what provision is to be made in conditions of ‘normality’, that is when higher education institutions reopen their doors, to ensure that all students have access to the resources necessary for a genuinely good quality higher education to which they are entitled (face to face or blended)? To strike an optimistic note, as hope springs eternal, I reproduce the words of one of the US’s most prominent critical educators, Ira Shor: “Critical teachers who question the unequal, toxic status quo will deliver critical education no matter the delivery system” (Shor, in Mayo, 2020).

3. COVID-19 and Neoliberalism

It is the uncritical educators, those who go with the flow, ever so eager to embrace new fads, who are of great concern to me. There is a terrible and unequal world out there that needs to be confronted. Covid-19 has shown the true face of neoliberalism as years of renegeing on and shredding of the social contract have finally taken their toll with few public resources available to counter such a calamity. Hopefully, the much professed newly rediscovered sense of solidarity among certain academics will enable them to rethink their mission as people who not only *interpret* the world but contribute towards *changing* it. To do this, the genuine human factor in research and thinking remains paramount. The virtual classroom might be serving its purpose as a contingency during the crisis. Once the crisis is over, would it be only part of a more holistic approach that foregrounds ‘face to face’ encounters? My feeling is that the educator’s approving eye contact (difficult to occur online) can be enough to encourage shy or hesitant students to express what their facial gesture suggests but which would otherwise remain suppressed. The holistic approach would also include engagement with communities (Walcott, 2020) and ever changing communities at that – migrants are important agents here (Mayo, 2019). This applies to all disciplines for as a science student is on record as having said, during the pandemic, “...now, when the world’s attention is on a virus – a topic I’ve spent my whole adult life studying – what I think about most are social structures, inequality, and sacrifice. I think about people.” (Quizon, 2020). This might place the onus for societal relevance on the Humanities and Social Sciences but, I would argue, that it should apply to most university and higher education areas as they all impact on society and the rest of the environment.

⁵ Quite interesting here is the development of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Do they represent a case of ‘testing the waters’ for a business approach to Higher Education? Sarah Speight (2017) indicates the gradual mainstreaming of MOOCs. They are becoming a feature of degree courses offered at a considerable financial cost. Speight argues that MOOCs target people with a good education and familiar with basic learning modalities. They are those who can afford the ‘state of the art’ facilities that enable them to cope with the online provision – a case of giving more to those who already have? Is this a CPD (continuing professional development) outlet? The fee structure for courses is steep, according to Speight (2017). MOOCs are considered a key feature of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR) (Xing and Marwala, 2017).

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