

## *EDITORIAL*

### Education in Times of War: An Unanticipated Benefit of the Covid Pandemic

It has recently been drawn to my attention via an article sent to one of the journals under my editorship that education at all levels in times of war is a very difficult and often dangerous enterprise. Yet it is one of the things, like the production and distribution of food, the provision of health care and emergency services, that a contemporary society must maintain under any and all circumstances. The alternative is anarchy and the physical and intellectual starvation of the population, especially the young population of a country.

As this is written (October 2022) there are ongoing wars of some magnitude continuing in Yemen, in Ethiopia and in the Ukraine and there are many other pockets of conflict around the globe. All of this has been happening while the Covid pandemic continues to rage worldwide.

We have all been forced to learn to do things in a variety of alternative ways during the last three years due to the Covid crisis. Almost all the schools on the planet closed once the World Health Organization declared the spread of Covid to be a worldwide pandemic. Happily this did not mean the end of education for all those who had formerly gone physically to those schools. But it certainly meant that students, their families and the teachers of those students had to rapidly attempt to adjust to an entirely new learning situation.

From the many articles that this journal and others have received discussing these attempted transitions the results have been very mixed. There have been some modest successes but in general the problems were very difficult to surmount. The new educational order involved distance education of an entirely new kind. In the past distance education had often been engaged in as a supplement to standard face-to-face education in schools using such things as the postal service and the radio or latterly television. But nothing prepared schools and students for the transition to on-line learning using such means as Google, Zoom and a variety of analogues to these. Libraries were normally not digital libraries and only rare institutions (such as the University of Calgary) had actually developed more or less complete digital libraries where one

could sign in with one's institutional email account and receive books and articles more or less completely with a stroke of the keypad, often to any number of would-be readers.

Not only did schools have to adjust so that their teachers could work from home but each teacher would have to have adequate computer equipment and access to wifi and the necessary training to use it. Families who had no access to computers had suddenly to purchase these and also required access to expensive wifi, if it was actually available. Textbooks would have to be picked up at bookstores that were often closed completely or only open a special times or depend on Amazon or the postal service. An young students or whole families had to learn to use digital computers connected to the internet as well as being able to share a rare computer among a largish family with students working at different grades. All of these adjustments had to be made by the entire planet of teachers, students and families. Indeed the parents often had to become the teachers when nothing else was possible. What is not often mentioned is that at each step of the way for teachers, students and families the coping with the technology was the very first step. If must of been like trying to learn to ride a galloping horse and somehow having to climb onto its back as it rushed past in order to learn. Yet many managed to do this astonishing feat.

But let us now contemplate what it must be like for those not only struggling with Covid but also with a wartime situation. The obvious example here is the situation in the Ukraine where the Russian Federation, under the dictatorship of President Vladimir Putin, attacked the Ukraine from all angles on February 21, 2022. It is true that Putin's Russia had already attacked the Ukraine in 2014 and had captured and then declared the Crimea Russian sovereign territory. But with the February attack the entire country of the Ukraine was encircled by Russian forces an rockets were sent into the Ukraine from all directions. Not only were children and their families affected by the Covid lockdown and had to stay home but their homes were no longer safe. So many had to leave their homes and go to temporary shelters or to travel by train or bus or car to other locations in the Ukraine or even to other surrounding countries sympathetic to their plight such as Poland. In so far as there were temporary shelters that might be used for educational purposes and where there remained wifi internet connections these children had to somehow learn on line with teachers that themselves might have had to flee or disperse and who were available, if at all, on line. Adding to this were the complications of

organizing for safety in a shooting war with rockets and explosives everywhere. The Ukraine had to plan to look for the presence of nearby explosive objects and to neutralize these for the safety of the children. Evacuation routes had to be planned for that would enable escape if a bombing occurred nearby to what was supposed to be a safe shelter for the children and possibly their families. Places had to be retro-fitted to hold the students and their families or the simplest possible shelters had to be constructed. Stocks of materials, tools and other equipment, water and food had to be provided to all such sheltering spaces. And of course training for huddling and possible evacuation had to be managed whenever an air alarm signal was heard. All of this became the context for the new distance education online with teachers potentially anywhere in the country and perhaps outside it.

Of course all of these things would have been necessary just because it was an all out war with a relentless attacker. But the astonishing thing is that some education was possible even in these conditions due to the magical maintenance of the internet and the presence of Google like searches and Zoom like connections. Without these there could hardly have been much education at all except what might have been managed face to face from parents and older siblings. One supposes that while the Ukraine is certainly a focus of this kind of educational activity at this time that in places like Yemen and Ethiopia similar things have very likely occurred as well. If that is so the global disaster that has been the Covid epidemic has also had a positive side that while very unexpected is certainly welcome. I hope we can have more authors telling us about their educational experiments in coping with both Covid and perhaps the combination of Covid and war in future issues of this journal. In my own university institution we are already seeing that online education is here to stay although we are treating Covid as a threat with which we have coped successfully via multiple vaccinations to the entire student and staff population. One suspects that the university will never be quite the same, though perhaps the schools over most of the world and their students will return to something like the pre-Covid circumstances. Let us also hope that the war in the Ukraine and the others presently ongoing will soon be resolved and they too can return to the pre-Covid pre-war circumstances for the better education of all.

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