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Online Education in a Time of Grave Danger

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I taught a college course online. I used a program that was accepted at that level of education as the standard for teaching. The program took several sessions of individual instruction at the community college's tech center and lots of off-site practice to become competent in meeting students online for one class out of four classes each week. There is also a learning curve for students in how to use and navigate online learning software.

I enjoyed the one night a week I met with students online, but there were several weaknesses in the online experience that I consider now that schooling across the country has moved online, or what is called distance learning.

The course I taught was a compensatory reading course that first-year students tested into as one of three areas; the other areas were composition and mathematics. The remedial nature of the course created some learning issues that traditional academic subjects probably did not face as compensatory topics do. That said, there are areas that both compensatory and traditional academic instructors face that are similar. I did not have an online component to the regular academic course that I taught.

Getting all students to join the online segment of the course was only partly successful. Students did not always remain consistently involved in the online class discussion, something not unusual for compensatory programs, but especially hard to deal with in compensatory education. It was difficult to get students to read material included in the course syllabus for both the online part of the course and the regular class meetings. The desire for spoon-feeding was an issue that consistently was apparent, both online in the classroom setting.

Given the experiences related above, I wondered ("Education Crisis: From Pre-K to Higher Ed, Students Face Unequal Access During Coronavirus Shutdown," Democracy Now, April 29, 2020) how online instruction worked as masses of students had this kind of instruction as the only source of their education during this pandemic: This is Noliwe Rooks author of Cutting School Privatization, Segregation, and End of Public Education:
I think, as we've seen in so many other areas, the pandemic is exposing, just shining a light on, inequalities that are already there, as we see people who are impacted, who are falling ill, tend to be poor, tend to be Black, Latinx. The children who are suffering the most with this closing down of schools share similar kinds of demographics.

One of the things that is perplexing — and hopefully we can come out of the other end of this really taking this seriously — is we had absolutely no conversation. There were no emergency plans for closing of schools, for ceasing education. When it became clear that it was putting teachers and students and, as you mentioned, the numbers of educational workers who have lost their lives or fallen ill attempting to stay in classrooms, we had no plans for what happens if you take schooling offline. We quickly, across the country, New York City and elsewhere, decided on remote education.

Access to the Internet is the first consideration in online education, with some students deprived of easily accessible and reliable Internet service. Whether or not students interact online and the degree to which they complete online work assignments presents

another valid issue. How much supervision can adults at home provide for students? What computer hardware do students have access to for online instruction? What are the learning programs being used online and how much training does educational staff and students have in using the software? I spoke with one parent of a special education student who related the experience of supervising his child's learning online as onerous and incredibly time consuming during a time that he was fortunate to be able to work online from home. Another parent of a regular education student reported that her child had one whole-class learning experience each day and one more targeted learning interaction. I do not know what software programs were used for these online learning sessions or their effectiveness.

Education needs face-to-face instruction, practice, and social interaction between adults and children. Those variables are accepted and Covid-19 has stolen that interaction from millions of teachers, children, and young adults. As a society, the educational system at all levels was largely unprepared for online instruction. As someone experienced in educational issues, I can see the virus providing new "opportunities" for wealth and power to attack the effectiveness of public schooling in the US and attempt to further privatize the system, the latter being an area (an example is charter schools) that has not proved superior to public schooling.

Unions, under attack since the Reagan administration, now face the priorities of an education department at the federal level that would like nothing more than to weaken unions and schooling in the US with more privatization. As this pandemic has provided opportunities for wealth concentration by the already wealthy, it will also provide opportunities for further privatization of public schooling. Kids will lose in the end.

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