Towards a Border-Free Education

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author posits the need for education to take a leading role in the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. It is noted, in particular, how the disruptions to education caused by the pandemic exposed the fragility of education while also exacerbating inequalities as instruction went online. Because international education relies upon physical mobility the pandemic not only disrupted the education of millions of far-flung students but put their health, safety, and security at risk as borders closed and transportation was halted or became severely limited. The concept of "border-free" education is offered here as a way to minimize risks to internationally-mobile students (and scholars), while also removing barriers and expanding knowledge, diversity, and opportunities, particularly for the marginalized and vulnerable.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a multitude of things. First, the genuine fragility of the modern world was exposed in ways – and to a degree - unimaginable. Seemingly overnight, the planet closed.

Second, the fragility of education at all levels was laid bare, including the author's area, international education, where the number of internationally-mobile university students affected is unknown but may be five million (Schulmann & Trines, 2020). In terms of all learners, worldwide, UNESCO estimates that over 1.5 *billion* learners in more than 190 nations – over 90% of all students – had their educations disrupted by

the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020a). This does not include the 20% of all children, adolescents, and youth – globally - excluded entirely from education before that (UNESCO, 2020b).

Charles Sanders Peirce wrote of life as "a train of thought," and, therefore, unbounded and border-less (Peirce, 1958, 7.583). Conceiving of the leveraging of online and electronic environments for the betterment of all as being "border-free" - "border" understood here not only in the sense of a boundary separating geographical entities, but also in the sense of a barrier to be surpassed or, ideally, eliminated – is a way to respond responsibly not only to the needs of international education in a post-COVID 19 world but also to better meet the needs of the world in general. To achieve this, however, means making better use of technologies; using them to both reduce disruptions and mitigate risks related to mobility, while also expanding opportunity to all, notably under-represented, at-risk, and disadvantaged populations, including individuals with disabilities. With such a large percentage of learners impacted, the possible permanent loss to learning of even a small percentage of students whose educations were disrupted and do not return represents a massive loss of human potential, innovation, discovery, and positive change.

Quantitatively, the World Bank has estimated that potential impacts from the disruptions could result in a loss of between 0.3 and 0.9 years of schooling, increase by as much as 25% the share of lower secondary school children below the minimum level of proficiency, and "likely create a substantial setback to the goal of halving the percentage of learning poor by 2030" (World Bank, 2020). Simulations performed upon developing countries participating in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) suggest that, without substantial interventions, the loss of learning for just three months in the third grade could result in 72% of students becoming at risk of falling so far behind by the tenth grade that they will either have dropped-out or be unable to learn anything in school (Kaffenberger, 2020, pp. 5-7). These are deficits "likely to ripple through a generation" (Tawil, 2020, 1). As evidence of that, the World Bank further notes that resulting losses in earnings, on average, over a student's working lifetime could amount to a collective loss of $10 trillion in earnings across the cohort - if school shutdowns last only five months.

As even developed countries have experienced, school closures have revealed how much education has been relied upon to permit other essential activities like employment to occur. Parents and care-givers were increasingly compelled to stay home to tend to children and their education – a task borne substantially by women resulting in both disproportionately lost wages and lost opportunities (Krentz et al., 2020) while increasing their exposure to domestic violence. The latter has also severely impacted girls and young women (World Vision, 2020, 1). Additionally, school closures interrupt the provision of essential services to children – and by extension,

to families and communities – such as nutrition, health services, and harbors of inclusion and personal safety. In total, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that the reduction in working hours due to COVID-19 could amount to the equivalent loss of 400 million full-time jobs – an economic loss of US$3.5 trillion, or 5.5 percent of global gross domestic product for the first three quarters of 2019. (International Labour Organization, 2020, p. 1).

As education went online, the pandemic threw a spotlight upon the many long-standing inequalities in education, and also exacerbated those very same inequalities (International Commission on Futures of Education, 2020, pp. 3 and 11). Access to the internet, and the possession of even the most basic of skills needed to successfully use electronic resources, added to those inequalities. Organizations such UN/UNESCO, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and many others (See references for some examples, including an overview in UNESCO, 2020c, pp. 26-28) have responded to the disruptions and have also acted towards the elimination of the inherent inequalities. The International Association of Universities argues the need to "consider the opportunities to be explored and … advocate and raise awareness of the … global challenges and risks … in order to close gaps … and ensure an inclusive, fair, ethical, and human-centered approach to digitalization." (Van't Land & Pricopie, 2019, p. 5). We must never forget this digital divide that the pandemic has vividly exposed and must continue to work towards its elimination.

While (on the one hand) it is surely "an illusion to think online learning is the way forward for all," (International Commission on Futures of Education, 2020, p. 8) we can and should leverage appropriate electronic resources - including "old school" technologies such as TV and radio used effectively during current disruptions (See World Vision, 2020, p. 3 and UNESCO, 2020c, p. 26) and electronically-delivered resources and skills opportunities for teachers and parents that produce important ripple effects – for both the common good and to spotlight inequalities - while at the very same time lifting others up.

Leveraging electronic resources in a border-free manner can help education in achieving the following:

1) Help mitigate against future disruptions by reducing the need for mobility
   - At Georgia College, for example, my international unit early-on saw the contours of the pandemic developing and assisted study abroad faculty to begin to think about how to achieve their planned (in-country) outcomes in an electronic environment. Fully two-thirds of grounded summer faculty-led programs were re-designed – many quite innovatively - went online, were successfully delivered, and preserved students' academic progress. Georgia College is now pursuing border-free

opportunities of many sorts with collaborating partners on five continents.

2)	Expand education and exchange, particularly – and in support of UNESCO SDG 4 (See UNESCO, 2017) - to those excluded (variously) from traditional modes of education, both international and otherwise.

3)	Bring greater diversity and inclusion to the enterprise(s).

4)	Provide opportunities for greater focus, depth of study, and especially the greater integration of diverse voices and viewpoints.

5)	Spotlight inequalities of many types, and

6)	Promote in many ways the closing of digital - of knowledge - divides (Jensen, 2019, p. 53), and provide a "level playing field for all." (United Nations General Assembly, 2020, p. 20).

The concept of border-free education, thus, is not only a way to respond responsibly to international education needs post-COVID 19, but a way to better meet the needs of humanity, and to recognize, engage with, and respond fully to the aspirations of the world and all its people (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum, 2020).

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