Chapter 14

Lessons Learned From Virtual Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education During C19 Disruption

Sophia E. Moros

American Community Schools (ACS), Athens, Greece

ABSTRACT

This chapter sets out to present and reflect on the creative approaches implemented in teaching and learning during disruption, specifically in grades JK-5 that quickly became a reality at the American Community Schools (ACS) of Athens because of the C19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. During that time ACS Athens administration, including the schools' President, the Director of e-Learning, Dean of Academics, and the Elementary Principal (author) designed a "5-Phase Process as a disruptive intervention to transition from a traditional four-walled classroom into a virtual classroom, thus transforming learning experiences, routines, and perspectives." This chapter will provide a framework for the details of each phase while sharing the immediate responses to virtual learning which were based on best practices and technological pedagogical framework.

INTRODUCTION

Education systems around the globe have undergone a massive digital makeover because of the C19 pandemic. The pandemic locked teachers and students out of their physical classrooms worldwide and pushed 63 million educators to swiftly adjust academic practices from a face-to-face approach to a virtual environment (Valverde, Garrido, Burgos, & Morales, 2020). During this world crisis, educators found themselves dealing with the reality that digitization and educational systems were identified as unfit to prepare the future generation to meet 21st-century skills (Valverde, et al., 2020). Although working through an e-learning environment was not a new concept to secondary education or university students, specifi-

cally, those who had already experienced online courses, what was new was the expectation for students between junior kindergarten through fifth-grade to achieve the same goals as students in secondary and higher education. Along with this extraordinary expectation came the added pressures from both parents and teachers for students to perform equally well as they had previously done in traditional schooling, or face-to-face classrooms. Whilst it is true that best practice approaches to teaching were abruptly interrupted, the crisis has opened significant opportunities and possibilities for educational practices, even in younger grades. As a result, The American Community Schools (ACS) Athens elementary students and teachers transitioned seamlessly to online learning and performed above expectations while meeting the grade-level curriculum standards in the core subjects.

The American Community Schools (ACS) Athens is an American International School located in the heart of Chalandri (Athens), Greece, serving students from ages of 3 to 18, or grades Junior Kindergarten through 12th grade. It is a student-centered school that embraces American educational philosophy, principles, and values (ACS Athens, n.d., 2020). Student learning is facilitated in a trusting environment that promotes active participation for all students to realize their unique potential and strive as responsible global citizens (ACS Athens, n.d., 2020). In 2013, the school designed, trained, and prepared its faculty to use an instructional methodology called *i²Flex* (Avgerinou, Gialamas, & Tsoukia, 2014; Avgerinou & Gialamas, 2016a; Avgerinou & Pelonis, 2021) through Moodle, the school's Learning Management System. The i²Flex methodology is based on a conceptual framework that underpins the associated in-service teacher professional development, while also guiding the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of the school's Blended and Online Courses. The i²Flex methodology is founded on the following research based frameworks:

- the Quality Matters course design standards and K-12 rubric (Quality Matters, 2016);
- the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2009); and,
- the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000)

The creative design of the *i²Flex* methodology was developed with a progressive outlook on student education for the 21st century (Avgerinou, & Gialamas, (2016b). The blended approach of *i²Flex* identified student learning within three dimensions: **i:** independent, yet teacher-guided learning; **i:** inquiry-based learning; and **Flex:** flexible learning in a virtual classroom setting (Avgerinou, & Gialamas, (2016b). Since the implementation of *i²Flex* in 2013, ACS Athens Middle and High School faculty have been teaching through authentic modalities that uphold learner-centered instructional designs and experiences, while at the same time maintaining student-teacher contact through synchronous and asynchronous virtual class projects and meetings (ACS Athens, n.d., 2020).

As the practices of *i²Flex* pervaded the educational philosophy at the secondary levels, the administration implanted the methodology for all faculty professional development sessions and scheduled for faculty to train and prepare for a similar infused approach to teaching in the Elementary School, starting with 5th grade, then followed by an unhurried introduction for the 4th-grade teachers, and students, where it was named pre-*i²Flex*. Thus, the foundations for teachers between grades 6 to 12 were provided with frequent guidance and professional development sessions to assist students will make the necessary transition in learning from a blended approach to proficient users of online learning in grades 9 to12, while the pre-*i²Flex* training for 4th and 5th-grade teachers respectively, included gradual training sessions. Consequently, this focused and sustained, school-wide effort, educational technology integration has become embedded in the school culture thus impacting not only those grades required to make the

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