

Chapter 5

The Digital Divide in the World of Education at the Time of COVID-19

Giovanni Bronzetti

Università degli studi di Palermo, Italy

Graziella Sicoli

Università della Calabria, Italy

Dominga A. Ippolito

Università della Calabria, Italy

ABSTRACT

Education has always been a challenge, today even more so given the difficulties of the moment, to support school in the time of COVID-19. Schools at every level have reorganized the training offer, implementing technological solutions. All this has raised a problem: the division is no longer between those who have access to the network and those who do not, but between those who know and those who do not know these new tools. Lately the concept of digital divide, understood as a gap of opportunity between those who have and those who do not have digital skills, has evolved into the concept of digital inequality. Given these premises, the work investigates after careful analysis, the impact of digital systems on the educational system, such as the emergence of the “digital divide,” impacts on training within universities. To verify the “digital divide,” the work proposes a quantitative survey carried out through a questionnaire submitted to a sample of students. The subject of the survey is given by the students of the University of Calabria.

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INTRODUCTION

The disruptive event of the Covid-19 pandemic has altered social, work and study habits in every country in the world. In this scenario, completely unexpected in educational research (Hall et al., 2020), technology has become an essential tool to slow down and manage the crisis and mitigate its consequences. The crisis has accelerated the digitalization of education, but has also contributed to increasing the digital divide among students, a phenomenon that has been dragging on for years (Portillo et al., 2020). The new digital tools have avoided total paralysis of the economy by allowing millions of people to continue to carry out their activities and millions of students to continue learning and teaching through distance learning. However, there was no lack of inevitable delays attributable on the one hand to the limited digital infrastructures available and, on the other, to the scarce, and sometimes absent, technical skills necessary to use them.

The term distance learning means a teaching method that has allowed students and teachers to continue their training and learning path even if they are “physically” distant. All this required the adoption of new “digital” standards both in terms of instrumentation and specific skills. In particular, many academic institutions that were earlier reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approach had no option but to shift entirely to online teaching – learning. In this context, the adoption of e-learning was immediately inserted, which is the direct result of the integration of education and technology and is considered a powerful means for learning (Al-Fraihat, Joy and Sinclair, 2017).

The race towards “technological innovation” has inevitably accelerated the digital divide, that is the exclusion from the benefits dictated by technological progress and innovation with an inevitable negative effect on those who are excluded from it. Digital inequalities certainly feed school inequalities and educational poverty between those who have the tools available to communicate, work, study, being able to react to the moment of crisis, and those who do not.

In light of this premise, the idea of the work takes shape which, after a careful theoretical analysis of the impact of digital systems on the education system, investigates how the “digital divide” aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic impacts on education and on the provision of services within universities. The work proposes a quantitative survey carried out through the administration of a questionnaire to a sample of students from the University of Calabria who, starting from March 2019, have been engaged in the provision of online teaching.

The purpose is mainly to investigate the perception and satisfaction of students with respect to new forms of digital learning and with respect to the tools put in place by the university that have ensured the restart of the university through the e-learning platform. Subsequently, the work aims to understand whether the aid put in place by the university, especially in favor of the weakest, have been used and if used, if they have been effective, thus avoiding that no one is left behind.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The advent of the pandemic on a global level has led to a systemic revolution in different sectors, including education, paving the way for a new way of teaching. The world of education has fully opened up to the digital world and technology; this has allowed the academic activity not to suffer slowdowns and/or sudden braking, but to continue in its educational and cultural activities, ensuring a more innovative use.

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