

Chapter 4

Towards a Social Dramaturgy of Digital Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania: A Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Dragos M. Obreja

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6146-8721>

University of Bucharest, Romania

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its induced lockdowns, significantly changed the way the educational act was performed. Using both technological references in phenomenology and features on the relationship between performer and audience, encountered in social dramaturgy, this chapter follows the valences brought by the change in education in the online environment. Based on an exploratory approach made through discourse analysis with seven Romanian professors and 20 Romanian students, two major discursive repertoires can be identified: on the one hand, the one regarding the return to face-to-face courses and, on the other hand, the discourse on maintaining online courses. The discourse regarding the return to classical education is supported by all the interviewed teachers but also by the students who had connectivity problems during the pandemic. The favorable discourse for online classes was supported by most students, especially for temporal and financial reasons. This exploratory pattern confirms that even such choices have a socio-economic character, not necessarily an individual one.

INTRODUCTION

As has been the case in 2020, pandemic education has not only proved to be a difficulty for educators or education experts, but sociology itself seems to be marked by a serious redefinition of digital education. Not coincidentally, the phrase “New Normal of Education” in the title of this book confirms that

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well-known techniques in areas such as educational psychology, educational communication or classroom management need a broad rethink in terms of their applicability. Thus, while other chapters in this volume are mainly interested in the pedagogical or psychological dimension of education in the digital environment, this chapter aims to bring a sociological dimension to this phenomenon.

In particular, using concepts from the interactionist paradigm, the implications of Erving Goffman's contribution to digital education during pandemics, such as the latest Covid-19 pandemic, will be discussed. Thus, using the concept of performer developed by Goffman (1959), I propose to argue that there are different "signals" during the teaching-learning act, and these signals are well adapted to digital education precisely by the particularities of these platforms that learning is achieved. Using at the same time the phenomenological paradigm of analysis of digital technologies, this chapter aims to bring deeper insight on the idea that including education in the digital environment is subject to rules related to the dichotomy performer-its audience, even if this new educational context redefining the relationship between teacher and student. On the other hand, this chapter assumes the objective of highlighting that the very design of digital technologies encourages forms of social drama.

BACKGROUND

The Covid-19 pandemic, with its induced-lockdowns, changed in a systemic manner the way the educational act took place. Gradually, almost all universities are moving their courses online (Bao, 2020). Although at first glance it sounds quite reassuring, it is noticeable quite quickly that most universities have not prepared any strategy or infrastructure adapted to new media technologies. Since it is becoming increasingly clear that this shift in online courses will not be a short-term issue, students are beginning to face psycho-emotional issues such as depression, anxiety and distress (Essadek & Rabeyron, 2020). At an extreme level, due to an increasing amount of demands from teachers, along with the lack of social ties with their peers, some students even experience suicidal thoughts (Kaparounaki et al., 2020).

Among other results of pandemic researchers, it is observed that most students consider that learning is more effective when it takes place in the classical format. On the other hand, the same research conducted in India shows that two thirds of the students surveyed found that teachers improved their digital skills during a pandemic (Chakraborty et al., 2020). A visible advantage of the phenomenon of distance education is that it allows an intense analysis of the critical way in which young people relate to technology. Such a pattern is not only related to their age but, as we see in multiple studies, young people's interest in the digital environment is also influenced by the awareness that their future will be predominantly digital (Kinnula et al., 2017; Mariën and Prodnik, 2014). The need to adapt to a completely new learning environment has come as a challenge for both students and teachers, all the more visible as the applications used for online teaching-learning have been constantly expanding. Even where there were no technical issues such as internet connection or affordance of digital devices, there are still issues related to understanding the facilities that these applications bring to online learning.

Certainly, being about different contexts, it is observed that online education in the university environment is quite different from pre-university education (Iivari et al., 2020). This is influenced by a number of variables, such as: the profile of the university environment where the activity is divided into courses and seminars, but also the profile of the faculty where the courses take place; variable that influences how that academic community relates to technology.

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