

Chapter 66

Reflecting on Self–Reflection: Overcoming the Challenges of Online Teaching in a Romanian School Through Action Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the challenges of online teaching faced by six English teachers in a state school in Romania in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As first-time action researchers, these teachers self-reflected on their challenges to make sense of their experiences as they transitioned from face-to-face to online teaching in a collaborative research self-study. Reflective practice is the conceptual framework within which the complexities and tensions of online teaching will be explored, as well as the process by which the authors have responded to the social and technological changes caused by the pandemic. Excerpts from the authors’ voices highlight their personal views and experiences as online teachers. It is hoped that not only will this self-study reflection-in-action research provide some useful lessons regarding online teaching, but it will also showcase the benefits of collaboration and reflective practice and the action it led to.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a fascinating but unpredictable experience. Sometimes too unpredictable... In March 2020 I instantly realized that I had been invited to ride a bike without a chain. My educational objectives were clear, but I felt I had not been appropriately trained to face the challenges of online teaching. (LMS, teacher, author of self-reflection)

Many teachers in Romania and around the world probably experienced the same realization as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded, bringing about major changes not only in the way we interact on a daily basis, but also in the way we teach. In this new context created by the pandemic, education in Romania shifted focus towards online and hybrid teaching, with significant implications for teaching and learning. During the initial stages of the breakout, March-June 2020, all schools in Romania closed and some form of online teaching was adopted in most schools, across a range of subjects. A lot of teachers were not prepared for such a challenge, especially as they received little to no support from their schools. In September 2020, when the new school year started, a new teaching format was introduced in many schools – the hybrid format – which raised additional barriers for teachers to overcome.

This action research self-study aims to highlight the challenges of online teaching that the English teachers at Colegiul Național “Andrei Șaguna” (CNAS), a state school from Romania, have experienced since the pandemic, and the changes they have adopted to be better prepared for both hybrid and online teaching. The main research question is what lessons can be learned from the authors’ own lived experiences of online teaching. The authors chose action research because it is the methodological approach that seems most suited to the authors’ educational context, allowing for reflection and enabling the authors to identify weaknesses in their own online teaching practice and to develop solutions collaboratively to address them.

BACKGROUND

Online Teaching

Online teaching has been embraced by many schools and universities with the rapid spread of the use of the Internet and there are many for whom this format is a choice. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, “online teaching is no more an option, it is a necessity” (Dhawan, 2020, p. 7) and teachers have had to use technology for teaching, regardless of the level of their e-learning competence (Babić et al., 2020). Online teaching and learning can occur in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices connected to the Internet (Singh & Thurman, 2019). In synchronous online classes students are all online and learning at the same time, while in asynchronous online classes students log on to a platform and work on it in their own time and at their own pace (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). According to the same authors, hybrid or blended learning combines online components with traditional, face-to-face components.

The rapidly changing nature of technology has had a striking impact on students’ modes of expression (Swenson & Taylor, 2012) and has altered the way they learn. Rather than listening passively to lectures, students want to be doing and creating (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016), so teachers must make creative use of these technological developments and avoid the tendency of replicating traditional educational

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