

Online learning is not only about video conferencing - expert

Teaching and learning online 'a daunting task'

Education

National

COVID-19

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The COVID-19 situation has fast-tracked online teaching methods, according to one expert.
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While children need to be together in schools, this is also an opportunity to improve the remote teaching concept

Remote learning should not only be about video conferencing but must include a mix of networking and interactive teaching and learning activities that motivate children and maintain their attention span, an expert has said.

Joseph Vancell, a lecturer in the foundations of online teaching and learning with the Faculty of Education, was asked about remote learning following the forced [closure of schools](#) due to the COVID-19 outbreak last March.

The debate about online and in-person teaching has been rekindled as the new scholastic year approaches, and authorities on Wednesday [announced guidelines](#) for how schools will operate when they reopen later this month.

“One cannot expect children to sit in front of a screen for hours unless there are different activities or a degree of interaction. Even adults would find it hard to keep focused for prolonged periods,” Vancell said.

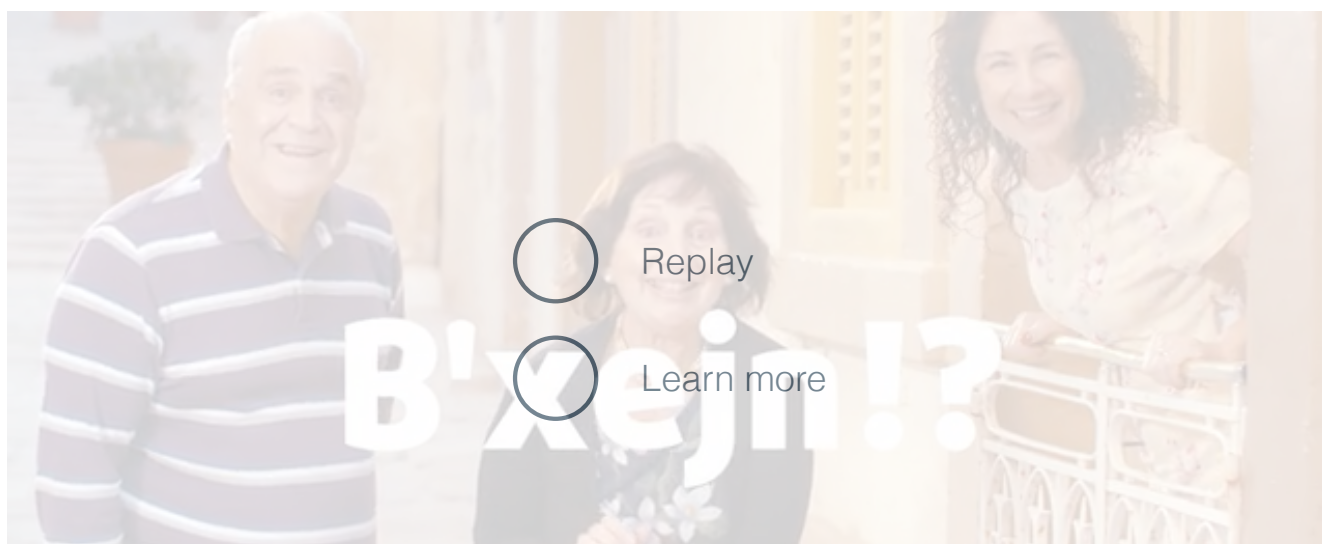
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He said results of various research projects being done by the University of Malta on the impact of online learning were not yet in hand.

However, the feedback gained from school leaders, teachers, parents and learners suggested that the lack of interaction with other children may cause psychological harm.

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“ One cannot expect children to sit in front of a screen for hours unless there are different activities ”

Teaching and learning online is also a daunting task for many parents, particularly those who are not tech-savvy.

The problem becomes more pronounced when in the household there is only one computer, the parents are teleworking and the device must be shared by the siblings.

Moreover, young children need the presence of their parents during online teaching, he said.

“Though I am very fond and an advocate for the use of more online teaching and learning, children need to be together in schools because learning should be a collective social experience,” he added.

Vancell pointed out that remote teaching was also posing challenges for teachers amid reports that online absenteeism was on the rise with many students going under the radar.

“It is much harder for teachers to gauge if students are understanding or not, while an educator who is very good in the classroom is not necessarily equally good in online

teaching.

“Teachers were caught unprepared for online teaching when schools closed in March,” he noted.

While not entering into the merits of whether schools should reopen or not, he emphasised that for online teaching, there should be an adequate infrastructure in place not to rely solely on video conferencing.

Asked about possible alternatives, Vancell said there were various software applications depending on the age group.

These include ClassDojo or even popular games such as Minecraft which could be used for problem-solving activities.

“Children need skills to face new realities, such as the ability to distinguish between genuine and fake news. The teacher’s role has changed from the traditional model whereby they use to give instruction, to one which empowers students to learn the necessary skills and make discoveries themselves,” he said.

‘A blessing in disguise’

Senior lecturer Philip Bonanno has described the COVID-19 situation as a ‘blessing in disguise’ as it forced the fast-tracking of new teaching methods.

“COVID-19 compelled us to shift from a teaching to a learning paradigm. Teachers have to design and develop learning activities for students to follow. And students (and parents) have to take a much more active role in managing their education,” he said.

“We are finding it difficult because we did not invest in developing competencies related to self-directed learning and how we can use technology to mediate our education.”

Bonanno added that the only way forward in the circumstances was a radical innovation approach.

“We would never have done it in an incremental way. It would be a big mistake if we open schools to go back to our former methodology and abandon this trajectory for innovation,” he said.

“I really hope we do not miss the COVID-19 bus.”

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