

Opportunities for Education

in Times of Pandemic and Post-pandemic



To address the challenges and problems faced by our educational institutions in pandemic and post-pandemic times, we as Seventh-day Adventist educators will have to regularly reinvent ourselves. To remain relevant in a society that is constantly transforming, we will need to update our knowledge, pursue professional development, learn new skills, and be creative. These behaviors will be es-

sential to being relevant in the “new normal.”

In this increasingly digital society, rife with social, political, economic, and cultural instabilities, education acquires greater relevance because of its emphasis on nurturing and developing citizens who are committed to the wellbeing of others and the improvement of society. Specifically, this requires an education that, as Ellen White¹ wrote, encompasses the whole human being throughout his or her entire period of existence, and ensures the harmonious development of physi-

cal, intellectual, spiritual, and social faculties.

Thus, Adventist educators must intentionally pursue opportunities for continuous education to learn how best to meet the needs of students and the requirements of various governing bodies (e.g., governments and accrediting agencies). Educators must be willing to reinvent themselves as they serve in rapidly changing societies. About the times in which she lived, Ellen White wrote that “the opportuni-

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ties for coming in contact with men and women of all classes and of many nationalities, are much greater than in the days of Israel.”² And, more so today, even with quarantine and social distancing, we have an array of opportunities due to advances in digital communication and technology.

Societies Facing Critical Conditions

Seismic social changes typically occur after major events such as wars, economic crises, technological advances, and plagues, also known as accelerators of the future or of history.³ At the beginning of the 21st century, economists declared that society had entered the Fourth Industrial Revolution (or Industry 4.0),⁴ and hypothesized that digital transformation would be the primary cause of change,⁵ but its impact on society had not yet been felt in a significant way.

In the social sciences, the concept of Education 4.0 appeared. Its focus centered on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT)—defined as “all devices, networking components, applications and systems that combined allow people and organizations (i.e., businesses, nonprofit agencies, governments and criminal enterprises) to interact in the digital world”⁶—to develop competencies that serve Industry 4.0.⁷ However, many were skeptical that, in the short term, this concept would become dominant in society.

However, since March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the emergence of a significant accelerator of history, now known as the COVID-19 pandemic,⁸ societies worldwide have been undergoing significant changes that are putting the infrastructure of governments, institutions, and companies to the test. Social behaviors have been defined by isolation and social distancing.⁹ Commercial interchange has suffered a slowdown in its different modalities, paralyzing the production of goods and services, and consequently economic growth.¹⁰ In 2020, the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) predicted a drastic contraction of the world economy by 5.2 percent for 2020, which would have made it the worst recession since World War II.¹¹ However, the greatest impact has been the loss of lives, mainly of older adults and those with chronic diseases and pre-existing conditions,¹² though an increase in the number of deaths in young people has recently been observed.¹³

The prolonged closure of educational institutions will continue to cause not only short-term learning losses, but also future difficulties related to the formation of human capital. During the onset of the pandemic, many students were unable to continue their education, and many experienced the loss of professional, employment, and economic opportunities.

For these reasons, we hear phrases such as: “Life after the pandemic will be different” or “the world will not be as it was before,” which reflect the impact that COVID-19 has had on societies worldwide.¹⁴ Definitely, the world is not, nor will it be, the same; and we are not referring only to health problems due to the pandemic, but also to the crises generated in the social, emotional, political, financial,

and educational spheres.¹⁵ Writing about the time in which she lived, Ellen White said, “The present is a time of overwhelming interest to all living. Rulers and statesmen, men who occupy positions of trust and authority, thinking men and women of all classes, have their attention fixed upon the events taking place about us,”¹⁶ and the same can be said of the time in which we now live.

Education Confronted With New Realities

The impact upon and crises generated in education have been substantial because to prevent the spread of contagion, educational institutions largely suspended their in-person activities. Initially, education was practically paralyzed, because most students were not able to attend school in person¹⁷; however, despite this challenge, many schools were able to reorganize using a variety of digital platforms, and utilizing strategies such as delivering learning packets to homes or tutoring students by telephone. Yet, despite these interventions, the prolonged closure of educational institutions will continue to cause not only short-term learning losses,¹⁸ but also future difficulties related to the formation of human capital. During the onset of the pandemic, many students were unable to continue their education, and many experienced the loss of professional, employment, and economic opportunities.¹⁹

The global network of schools and institutions supported by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which follow the mission established by the Creator and seek to achieve academic excellence, faced the same challenges and experienced similar negative impacts. Administrators and teachers sought to implement a variety of actions to overcome the impact of this crisis, maintain quality standards, and thus continue to be relevant in their environment.

Although the pandemic has forced society and education to adapt to numerous challenges, the most impor-

tant thing is to take advantage of the opportunities presented in these new scenarios. Ellen White's counsel to teachers applies to all educators: "If you are called to be a teacher, you are called to be a learner also. If you take upon yourself the sacred responsibility of teaching others, you take upon yourself the duty of becoming master of every subject you seek to teach."²⁰ Regardless of the challenges, whether in classroom teaching or administration, educators must pursue opportunities to expand their knowledge base for the betterment of the students they serve.

Yet, the challenges are real. Among the most relevant ones faced by educators around the world, including those in Adventist educational institutions, are these:

- *Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the Internet.* In 2020, worldwide, approximately 3.18 billion people did not have access to the Internet, which is equivalent to 41 percent of the world's population.²¹ In addition, many educational institutions, tasked with developing students' digital skills, do not have an adequate technological infrastructure.²² Learning inequalities in educational institutions have tended to worsen during the pandemic.

- *Use of information and communication technologies in the educational process.* Due to the pandemic, some educational institutions were forced to change to an emergency mode for which they were unprepared, described by Hallgarten²³ as "online face-to-face teaching." This modality does not resemble the previously defined modalities within virtual education, because conceptually, the same in-person teaching strategy is applied, but in the virtual mode. Many educators were not provided with the training or technology tools they needed to adapt to the emergency situation and had to rely on using methods that were far from ICT best practices for true distance education.²⁴



- *Meaningful learning in virtual environments.* Even for those who had the opportunity to access virtual-learning environments (VLE), the adaptation process necessary to attain meaningful learning was not implemented in a consistent way. Although intrinsically motivated or technically and emotionally skilled students found that they could learn in these environments, vulnerable groups struggled to learn independently. The latter will probably need reinforcement of knowledge and skills when face-to-face learning resumes.

- *Screen time concerns.* Experts have expressed concerns about young children's increasing screen time. According to Poole-Boykin, quoted by García-Bullé,²⁵ screen time should be one to two hours a day for elementary students, two to three hours for high school students, and three to four hours for college students. The "overtime on the screen"—which includes time spent on entertainment and non-school-related viewing—will have a significant impact²⁶ on students, especially if a good portion of those hours are spent on effective learning and homework.

- *Increase of infoxication (e.g., information overload).* Due to the increased use of the Internet and social media, the crisis has aggravated the likelihood of information overload, called infoxication.²⁷ When this occurs, people have trouble adequately processing or understanding the deluge of information they encounter in their daily lives.

Finding Opportunities During the Pandemic and Post-Pandemic

In general, crises are the best times to look for opportunities. In the field of education, it is possible to find several of them related to the pandemic. In the next section, we will list some ways to use the lessons learned to improve teaching success.

Strengthening of Affective Relationships

Although virtual environments make it difficult for participants to interpret non-verbal aspects of communication such as gestures, facial expressions, body posture, eye contact, etc.,²⁸ several studies show that

ICTs can facilitate the establishment and strengthening of relationships in a variety of social environments (home, work, and school).²⁹

Because the pandemic has expanded the opportunity to implement a variety of types of effective communication in virtual environments, educational institutions, as well as individual teachers, can establish much stronger relationships with those directly interested and engaged in the educational experience.³⁰ For example, during the height of the pandemic when students and parents were quarantined and had more time at home, there were opportunities for teachers to develop personalized virtual tutoring sessions, conduct virtual wellness checks, and pray together with the family unit.

Development of Creative Initiatives for Teaching

In the new online face-to-face modality using resources such as Zoom or Google Classroom or some of the many other virtual platforms,³¹ it is possible to implement innovative teaching and learning strategies³² or to creatively explore already-known methodologies, such as inverted or flipped classroom; project-based learning or integrated tasks; cooperative learning; gamification; problem-based learning; competency-based learning; design thinking; and thinking-based learning.³³

Digital and Information Literacy

Technology has proved to be a useful and relevant tool in the current crisis, and for this reason, companies and educational institutions are strategically embarking on the process of digital transformation.³⁴

These changes need to focus on developing and enhancing digital and information literacy skills. Information literacy is the ability to systematize relevant data to solve problems or make decisions.³⁵ This extends beyond the use of computer tools or programs; it encompasses areas ranging from knowing how to use a social network to sharing and storing documents in the cloud (cloud computing).³⁶

Rethinking the Education Model and Updating the Curriculum

The “online face-to-face” modality challenges the traditional model and has created new scenarios that fundamentally change the educational process; this can give students greater autonomy and independence and can allow them to take charge of their own learning.³⁷ However, for this to occur, educators must be intentional

In the formal and informal curriculum, students must have opportunities to engage through service, community engagement with local cultural or religious organizations, and connecting with peers in other parts of the world in diverse virtual classrooms.

about planning and implementing strategies that will enable students to build these skills.

Therefore, the traditional face-to-face education model of meeting specific schedules and completing tasks can be adapted by implementing new modalities such as the semi-presental modality (partly virtual, partly in-person), also known as hybrid modes of learning.³⁸ However, it is important to

recognize that, due to personal, family, or cultural factors, many students will find it difficult to engage in self-motivated learning and to adapt or respond to change. Additionally, due to changes in society, educational institutions must update curriculum models to meet the demands of the “new normal,” such as implementing a competency-based curriculum using interactive methods of instruction.

Integration of International and Intercultural Concepts Through “Internationalization at Home”

Educators have become more aware of the global nature of the teaching-learning process, which can generate opportunities to strengthen students’ knowledge of global and local factors that affect their life experiences. Conceptually, this process consists of the intentional integration of international and intercultural concepts into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within institutional learning settings.³⁹ In the formal and informal curriculum, students must have opportunities to engage through service, community engagement with local cultural or religious organizations, and connecting with peers in other parts of the world in diverse virtual classrooms.

Through the use of ICTs and keeping in mind that Adventist education is a worldwide network linked to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it is possible to make use of the possibilities of internationalization by scheduling academic, social, cultural, and spiritual events among the institutions of the different countries. Educators must have opportunities for ongoing training on how to integrate these types of experiences into the virtual classroom.

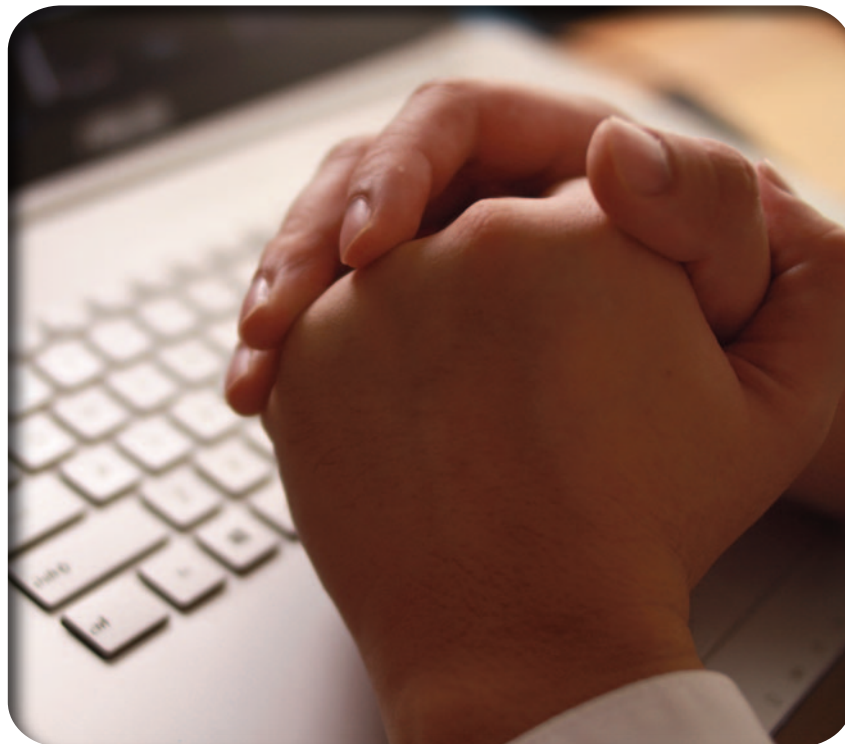
Lifelong Learning: The Best Approach to Finding New Opportunities

After the pandemic, in the “new normal,” education will continue to face unprecedented challenges.⁴⁰ Educators in this new normal can either continue as before or build roads for constant renewal. The most comfortable option would be to reinstate the same model and traditional ped-

agogies. However, considering the uncertainties in the new normal,⁴¹ the best way forward is renewal, through a cycle of learning, unlearning, and relearning. Through lifelong learning, educators can develop a vision that will enable them to provide solutions to the new problems that will arise.

In the end, it is up to each educator, using the tools available, to decide to constantly renew himself or herself, and play a relevant role in this pandemic and in the post-pandemic; it is also up to administrators to ensure that opportunities for renewal are available, and employing organizations to require continued professional growth. It is up to each one to take responsibility for improving his or her knowledge, skills, and competences. We need to learn to visualize and prioritize the opportunities above the difficulties, to prepare for and adapt to the changes resulting from and implemented by the new normal. The future belongs to those who are humble and willing to keep learning throughout life. And while we are in this world, we can move forward with the assurance that God is in control of history, and by His grace, we will be victorious because He tells us, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10, ESV).⁴²

The future belongs to those who seek to be permanently renewed in a harmonious way in their spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional life because “True education means more than pursuing a certain course of study. It has to do with the whole person, and with the whole period of existence possible to human beings.”⁴³ “A crisis is right upon us. We must now by the Holy Spirit’s power proclaim the great truths for these last days. . . . God is the great Master Worker, and by His providence, He prepares the way for His work to be accomplished. He provides opportunities, opens up lines of influence, and



channels of working. If His people are watching the indications of His providence, and stand ready to co-operate with Him, they will see a great work accomplished.”⁴⁴ When pointing to the Infinite Being, the Scriptures present in the following words the source of such education: In Him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3); “he has counsel and understanding” (Job 12:13).

Christ soon will come, and we will be able to learn eternally with the true Master in the Eternal School, where “every power will be developed, every capability increased. The grandest enterprises will be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations will be reached, the highest ambitions realized. And still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of body and mind and soul.”⁴⁵ Adventist education, at various academic levels, and through its educational projects, must promote this type of development. ✍

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