Towards a new world: reflections in a post-COVID world19 - Re-educating education

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The current COVID19 crisis is producing important consequences for our organizations, our lifestyles and our ways of thinking. Obviously, some of these consequences are particularly visible: on health, social interactions, the economy, etc. But others are more subtle, deeper and require that we pause and dig deep.

If we want to create a real change in society during these difficult times, it is important for us to go deep in the reflection and not to stop at what is just obvious and visible. The threat is invisible and complex, we must face it by facing the systemic complexity of the world today and try to identify all the elements requiring change.

Today, we are going to focus on education because this crisis has revealed many elements linked to the education system which deserve to be analyzed at the local, national, international level.

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The ABCD of information

You, like all of us, have certainly used social media and digital media a lot in recent weeks. By digital media I mean all of the professional journalistic platforms that have opened their pages or modes of broadcasting to users' comments creating a different relationship between the messengers, the message and the recipients of the message.

You have most certainly been surprised, like me, by the attitude of many people on social networks: a cascade of insults, cookie-cutter criticisms, unfounded rumors, conspiracy theories and the like. If things have settled relatively over the weeks, probably due to a certain tiredness of information, the first days of confinement were indicative of a known attitude made more visible by this crisis.

This is indeed not new, social networks, since their beginnings, have generated many negative behaviors, such as online harassment and partisan divisions, from everyone. We have all fallen into the trap at one time or another.

The crisis has only demonstrated:
• that we have not been educated in the use of social networks;
• that information has profoundly changed in its very nature;
• and that social networks, in times of crises, are fundamental tools when they are well used.

If we place ourselves on a civilizational time scale, it is quite easy to realize that social networks and digital information are excessively young at a human level.

The Internet dates back to the second half of the 90s for its general public spreading, Facebook in 2004. All in all, our "digital life" only started 20 years ago. At that age I was (I won't tell you where I was and what I did when I was 20) but if you remember your own 20s, I think we can all agree that this was not our period of greatest maturity. And that's normal.

On the other hand, the dissemination of information through written physical medium dates back several centuries. We had time to get used to it and integrate it into our mindsets. Therefore, social networks and the internet, that pushed the term "information age" arrived very recently in our lives and we clearly did not receive the manual for it (and if you had fun reading the terms & conditions of these sites you are the only one). It is as if you were given an airplane without training and asked to take off.

How can we then hope for a cautious, reasoned and reasonable attitude on social networks if we do not know how to use it?

Because let's be clear:
• As human beings our default mode of communication is face to face: I speak to you, you hear me and you see me. This mode of communication shares much more than words. It shares: context, emotions (through the tone of voice and attitudes), feelings (through non-verbal language);
• Writing was basically used to memorize information or transmit it over long distances. But at a speed that, for a long time, meant that this information was not instantaneous and that, very often, once the news was received, it was more of history than of the news. We had physical distance over information;
• And, information has long been transmitted vertically: first through parents, then teachers and ultimately the authorities (employer, government, experts). Very often this vertical transmission left us captive to the original source of information. The information was certainly clearer, but no one could really be sure about the truth of it.

Then, almost overnight, information became instantaneous, promiscuous although physically distant but still mainly written and horizontal. A change on which we did not take the time to reflect and to define methods of effective use.

Because of their ease of use (one click and it's shared), we almost forgot that communication was a complex tool that required training before using it. In times of crises, when our fears and our anxieties naturally take over, these instantaneous and horizontal platforms become an uncontrolled crucible, echo chamber of a thought formerly confined to our minds or our inner circles. This leads us to certain Facebook lives where everyone spreads their analysis and insults. We exchange bits of information but we do not communicate. Because to communicate is to share, it is to transmit, it is to give something and to exchange it for something else. However very often, on social networks, everyone remains confined behind their screen, forgetting the presence of a real person on the other side. We spread our ideas, our points of view, our positions that we oppose to others until one of us ends up saying: « *you have your point of view, I have mine, don't bother to carry on* ».

Where's the sharing? Where is the exchange? Clearly this is not communication. But since we don't know how to do it, we give up. Even though it's exactly when the real conversation starts.

However, these same social networks are those that we use to continue to exchange with our friends, our families, our colleagues in a world that requires us to "distance ourselves socially". It is therefore essential not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

We must therefore take the problem from the other side: we must educate everyone, the young generations of course but all generations in the end, to these new tools.

I remember a conversation five years ago with some members of my family. I argued that computer coding and digital tools had to integrate school curricula very early on and, in any event, be part of the education system. To this they replied that these are only accessory elements and that the priority must remain with fundamental knowledge: spelling, grammar, math, languages.

They went on saying that maintaining the teaching and learning of traditional communication tools (written, oral and scientific languages) was fundamental. Which is obvious, but why draw a line over the new communication tools? These tools which create new intellectual patterns, new methods of thinking, of exchanges and therefore of communication.

If one has to know how to write and ensure a certain structure in this way of communicating, this must be true for digital communication tools (spelling and grammar are only conventions accepted by all to facilitate understanding and they are established on the basis of common rules which prevent everyone from creating their own language, in a modern remake of the Tower of Babel). Otherwise, these tools will continue to produce undesirable effects.

If I want to prevent my child from getting injured with a hammer, I will teach them how to use it. If I want to avoid that they make a weapon out of it I will teach to them the rules of usage, social conventions accepted for the use of hammer (namely, not to smash it on your neighbor's head).

And this must therefore be integrated into school curricula because our world today is digital, horizontal and instantaneous. If education does not integrate these fundamental principles of our current societies into its teaching logic, then we will remain locked in a nostalgic cliché like "the chorus" movie which will only nourish the melancholy of parents lost in the romanticized times of a bygone era, when our little heads will be lost in the face of tools that they cannot avoid but for which they have no instructions.

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E ducation is not a place but a (critical) state of mind
Beyond that, there is a more fundamental problem underlying the lack of education in social networks: the lack of critical thinking.

It is enough to see how quickly certain information is shared to realize that the article is not read, not checked, not even questioned. The click-bait mentality, implemented by these same social

networks and playing on instinctive behaviors linked to our emotional reactions has wreaked havoc.

However, what makes human beings different from other animals is not their emotions. Other species have emotions (except maybe cats but that's another debate!).

No, what makes the difference is our pre-frontal cortex, that part of our brain located just behind the forehead (that's why we have a prominent forehead that distinguishes us from our great ancestors or hominid cousins) . This part, the most recent in terms of biological evolution, is the one that allowed us to create the world in which we live.

Because this area of our brain (of course as always in association with other areas of our brain) allows us to think of rational intangible concepts, to build stories, to question ourselves about ourselves, about life and about the universe. Without that, there would be no art, no politics, no economy, no literature, no religion.

Unfortunately, the current situation, as created by the technology implemented by social networks, has strongly emphasized the satisfaction of our primary instinctive and emotional behaviors more than encouraging our prefrontal cortex and our modern behaviors in terms of biological evolution.

That's the"technological" context. Let's look at the issue from an institutional perspective now.

Many education systems have inherited a political will to use "national education" systems to transmit their message and guarantee the normalization of citizens and their "formatting" to the social contract and to the socio-political model supported by the system in place.
Faced with this, we therefore witnessed, during the crisis, two specific phenomena:
• The significant absence of questioning and critical approach to the information disseminated;
• And, the lack of knowledge and control over the functioning of our institutions.

The second point may seem paradoxical knowing that the political system uses national education to [cons]train their citizens. Except that it does not do it in an approach that helps everyone to understand their rights as well as the fundamentals principles of the system. We are not in a critical education but more in a search for 'normalization'.

And with this second point comes a huge distrust of the system. This is a simple syllogism: I don't know how the system works, so I don't understand it. Knowing that what I do not know / understand is frightening, anxious therefore the system is anxious and frightening therefore I reject it.

On the other hand, those who, out of the abyss of the Web, come with simplistic answers and explanations (embellished with beautiful illustrations of the reasoning by the absurd or '1 + carrot = conspiracy') appear reassuring as they provide clarity in a complex situation.
It is hard to resist these simplistic explanations when one seeks to reassure oneself in the face of the unknown and the unthinkable. Very often those, whose job it is to understand all the elements of a crisis, arrive with a scientific approach based on doubt. Unfortunately, doubt is

seen as uncertain and therefore provokes anxiety. Why would we believe an authority which expresses doubt against a self-proclaimed expert who has understood everything?

It is too easy to say that these situations are due to a "lack of intelligence" (which in itself has no meaning, intelligence being a much more plural concept). The critical sense, the capacity to reason, to think, to imagine is like any human capacity: it is learned, it is trained, it is maintained. I have been fortunate enough to teach at the university for many years. And I have seen all these years a clear trend: students expect everything to be told to them. Of course there are always some who question and criticize but, overall, everything has to be served and then they just repeat. I often tell my students: "If I wanted to make you parrot my words, I would buy a computer, it would save me from your misspellings."

How many of you remember a time at school when 'learning by heart' was used very often? Or did you have to make sure to repeat the course during the tests?

Of course learning things by heart is sometimes necessary (doctors and pharmacists have no choice but to know the human body or the pharmacopoeia automatically). But lawyers clearly do not need to learn all the texts contrary to what many think. They need to learn the mechanics and understand the ins and outs (the letter and the mind) to build reasoning for or against. Similarly, citizens should have the reasoning skills necessary to effectively question institutions, information and situations so as to make informed and thoughtful decisions.

Because the problem of the absence of a critical mind is that any conversation becomes an ideological debate more than a debate of ideas. It is no longer a matter of trusting what has been verified, analyzed, questioned, but rather of trusting your instinct, your emotions.
Like a backlash from a period where reason was held for too long as the only reliable element of any attitude (I think therefore I am) and emotions (so necessary for our intellectual balance) were shunned, emotions are now becoming the benchmark at the complete expense of reason. Reason becomes suspect, in particular when it contradicts feelings. But the problem is that the feeling is the single child of the single point of view of the individual. It is therefore self-centered even if it can be shared.

Reason, the heart of the scientific process, is the fruit of intellectual collaboration, the child of our social animal nature. More than my perspective, the addition of our points of view and the resulting exchanges via questions and discussions bring clarity and understanding of issues that often go beyond the individual alone (the laws of physics do not depend on what I feel and the planet revolves around the sun, not me!).

And ultimately, reason and emotion are not alternatives. It is not one or the other. These two elements are cumulative to allow us to use all of our brain capacities.

So you can't "believe" in science or not. Because science is not a belief but a method. It is based on initial beliefs which are then the object of a work of analysis and confrontation of problems, verifications and experiments which transform this belief into theory namely: the state of the art to date of the last exchanges and collaborations between many people.

One would have thought that social networks, the technical pinnacle of cooperation and human communication, would have enabled the development of this attitude of cooperation on the basis of the scientific method. Unfortunately social media platforms have played on the emotional element of our minds to make it a source of profit. Your fears pay off, your conflicts pay off. Your collective work not that much.

But there is hope because the current crisis has in a way also allowed everyone to remember that initially these platforms were there to connect us. Many have relearned how to use them to connect with friends and families locked inside their homes, at the same time when emotional debates were raging to assert feelings and to fight knowledge.
It is therefore important that our education system re-learns what science in its fundamentals is. It cannot be a question of imposing theories into various disciplines but rather taking the time to explain the scientific method and the fact that it is intrinsically linked to our prefrontal cortex therefore to our human nature.

Because in the event of a crisis, everyone should use their critical spirit to face the complexity that is becoming the rule in a changing world. Everyone should use their reason to frame their emotional feelings in a human approach in line with our biological evolution.

As the psychologists Cheap & Dan Heath describe it very well, the distribution between our reason and our emotions can be illustrated through the image of an elephant: our emotions are an elephant, massive and powerful, which can charge any time if it is scared and anxious. Our reason is the mahout who guides our elephant. Both must work together if we are to move forward effectively on the path of life.

For this, let us also remember that the internet now allows us to access any form of information quickly. The aim of the education system, in a digital world, is therefore no longer to transmit knowledge, information but rather to learn to analyze and understand this information.
So that our system can no longer be satisfied with information but be able to contextualize and enhance knowledge to gradually lead to collective wisdom (one that invokes our emotions as well) as explained brilliantly by Elif Shafak.

We live more and more in a complex world: invisible threats (viruses, rising temperatures, etc), macroscopic threats (climate change, poverty and global inequalities) which play on our institutional systems and our traditional structures (governments and borders). Our education system is supposed to train the citizens of tomorrow. We can no longer ignore today's situation and continue to propose a system based on the principles and context of the world of yesterday.

The Covid-19 therefore reminds us that our reason is not that of the strongest but of the most adaptive to paraphrase Darwin and that, when it is associated with our emotions, it saves us from being trapped by our primitive instincts and to make the most of all the abilities that nature has given us.

The Covid-19 crisis reminds us of our humanity. Our humanity is complex, the result of an evolution over several millennia which has led us to create the world in which we live. Our

emotions and our reason are products of this evolution. Since both of them are constitutive elements, it is good that they represent a relevant tool for our survival. Let's get the best out of each.

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