

The Role of Adult Learning and Education in (Post-)Covid Times

Katarina Popović, Ivan Nišavić

Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to global education systems, with adult education shifting to a virtual world and relying heavily on digital and ICT tools to maintain continuity of learning. However, the prolonged pandemic raises important questions about the future of adult education. The current essay examines the most significant changes in three key areas of adult education: health, citizenship, and digital technologies. It argues that adult education should not only equip people with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate a crisis, but also play a proactive role in shaping the future of education and the world. It should critically analyse and challenge mainstream ideas and offer constructive alternatives to proposed solutions.

Keywords: Adult Education; Citizenship; COVID-19; ICT in Education; Paradigm Shift

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the most significant disruption to global education systems in history, with over 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries affected at its peak, and around half of the world's student population (more than 800 million learners) affected in 2021 (UNESCO 2021). This has resulted in dramatic consequences for education deprivation, affecting various areas of life and work. In the first year of the pandemic, education and learning were seen as the most obvious 'victims' of the disease and the accompanying preventive measures, with national efforts focused on ways to continue education and learning even at a reduced scope. The immediate priority was to prevent further learning loss, which resulted in a massive shift to the virtual space and an enormous increase in the use of digital technology in education.

As adult education is more prone to react to changes in the social and economic environment than school education, it was either massively interrupted or moved to online platforms, digitally supported formats, and relied more on the internet than educational organizations or institutions. The second year of the pandemic brought a certain level of adaptation to the health crisis, but the feeling of uncertainty increased, and the perception of crises as a continuous

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup_referee_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Katarina Popović, Ivan Nišavić, *The Role of Adult Learning and Education in (Post-)Covid Times*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0151-3.05, in Vanna Boffo, Regina Egetenmeyer (edited by), *Re-thinking Adult Education Research. Beyond the Pandemic*, pp. 33-52, 2023, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0151-3, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0151-3

element of modern society became more prevalent. Additionally, the current situation is viewed as a major challenge, a crossroad, a turning point where humankind must decide which path to choose, as some of the main traits of social environment and social practices must be changed.

During the prolonged pandemic, questions are emerging about whether we are facing a new paradigm shift. Is the world going to be completely different? This paper explores the possibility of a paradigm shift, as defined by Thomas Kuhn in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). Kuhn explains that a 'paradigm' represents a universally recognized scientific achievement or a narrative that provides explanations for the current problem and solutions to a community of practitioners. The change of paradigm happens during crises, when anomalies in the existing paradigm become serious, and basic assumptions are challenged, leading to new theories and a new paradigm that offers a better explanation of the observed changes and fits better with the objective, external reality. The paradigm has broad power as it offers a dominant narrative, controls methods and problems, and defines standards; it is a «constellation of beliefs, values, and techniques» in humans (Kuhn 1970, 175). A paradigm shift is a fundamental change in the way people perceive events, and it is not only a matter of changing the current theory but the whole view of the world (Kuhn 1970).

Is this what is happening to the world during COVID-19, and what might be the consequences of the prolonged pandemic? The review of current publications, web pages, and digital sources shows that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are the dominant topic among policy makers, researchers, and practitioners. These consequences affect health, economy, politics, social context, cultural environment, and education, including adult education. The main question is how the 'new normal' will look like, and the answers range from a return to the 'good old times' (an idealized picture of a world that is even better since people have learned important lessons due to the pandemic) to the technologically driven dystopia of isolated individuals, closed borders, and drastically reduced interactions and social practice, where life is concentrated in the heart of the virtual world.

We are dealing with competing paradigms. Kuhn believed that the acceptance or rejection of a paradigm is a social as well as a logical process. He explains that the incommensurability of paradigms happens since they share no common measure and cannot be compared. Although he focused on scientific development, his explanation that social and political systems are changing in ways that call for new interpretations can apply to the current situation, as we face changes in many scientific disciplines, including education, together with changes in social practices.

Although the use of this concept is mostly associated with natural sciences, similar considerations can also be applied in an educational context. This is confirmed by Kuhn himself in the text *Second Thoughts on Paradigms*, published a few years after the aforementioned book. One definition of the term 'paradigm' is «a characteristic set of beliefs and preconceptions», which includes theoretical assumptions of a discourse related to education.

A scientific community consists, in this view, of the practitioners of a scientific specialty. Bound together by common elements in their education and apprenticeship, they see themselves and are seen by others as the men responsible for the pursuit of a set of shared goals, including the training of their successors. Such communities are characterized by the relative fullness of communication within the group and by the relative unanimity of the group's judgment in professional matters. To a remarkable extent the members of a given community will have absorbed the same literature and drawn similar lessons from it. Because the attention of different communities is focused on different matters, professional communication across group lines is likely to be arduous, often gives rise to misunderstanding, and may, if pursued, isolate significant disagreement (Khun 1974, 461-462).

However, problems, uncertainties, and disagreements inevitably arise, especially in times of crisis such as the one we are still experiencing. There is no answer to the uncertainty of the current development yet, no clear vision of the 'new normal', and no definitive answer to what a new education paradigm might look like. The reasons are multiple:

- The pandemic is still ongoing, and we are intensively dealing with questions about role, meaning, content, and forms of adult learning and education in the current situation. At the same time, we are thinking about the time after the pandemic. Therefore, the question here is about the role of adult learning and education both during and after the pandemic, as current actions and perceptions will shape the future as well;
- The educational response to the pandemic, as well as the future position and shape of this response, will depend on the answers coming from other spheres of life, which are even more difficult to predict. Therefore, we can only indicate the tendencies in the field of education and the ways in which other sectors might influence adult learning and education;
- Full analysis of changes in the field would require a comprehensive exploration of different aspects, such as the goal of education, current paradigms and discourses, roles and functions, content, numerous subsectors and specific areas of adult learning and education, methods, and organizational forms. Therefore, we will only choose a few of the most visible and dominant aspects and characteristics that might indicate the possible direction of changes and the type of crossroads the world of adult learning and education finds itself at.

2. Adult Education and Health

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the vital role of non-formal adult learning and education in adapting to changing circumstances. As the pandemic unfolded, fast and flexible measures were required to help people cope. Non-formal education and learning, including through online channels such as the internet, social media, television, radio, online courses, and newspapers, were employed

to share information on the virus, preventive measures, hygiene practices, and proper behaviour. The dissemination of knowledge and information on public health was massive, and the recent «Stay Responsible» campaign was one of the most widespread awareness-raising campaigns in history. The speed of response and ability to react to urgent needs in the case of a massive threat to public health was a unique aspect of non-formal education that no formal education unit could match.

Understandably, the pandemic imposed some urgent topics and motivated people to learn about very concrete health issues related to COVID-19, but the scope of health education was not to broaden so and to include issues that do play a role: healthy life-styles, new relationship between health and environment, awareness of all the risks and traps of the food industry etc.

While numerous papers, strategies, and recommendations have been published on broader strategic questions concerning public health, such as how the education system can develop individual and systemic resiliencies in health crises, how education systems can anticipate, respond to, and mitigate the effects of pandemics and similar crises, the proposed measures are usually limited to practical and technical solutions or general recommendations that could have been formulated without any lessons learned from the pandemic. Although research exploring lifestyle and eating habits before and during COVID-19 quarantine has been conducted, there have been hardly any lessons learned from the specific pandemic or any suggestions for policy makers and curriculum developers to change the curriculum and content of education and learning to include broader knowledge of health.

While media and portals have provided superficial advice on health awareness, urging people to «Stay hydrated! Stay energetic! ... Feeling stressed? Breathe!» (News 18 2021), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has not shown any ambitious awareness-raising effort. Instead, they instruct people to «follow World Health Organization (WHO) guidance and governmental advice to protect against COVID-19 infection and transmission. Physical distancing and good hygiene are the best protection for yourself and others against COVID-19», continuing with the usual «eat plenty of fruits and vegetables ... Watch your intake of fats, sugar, and salt» (FAO 2020).

Well, we knew that. Will education system undertake steps to enable transformative learning and create new awareness and long-term changes this time? This wasn't done enough after swine flu pandemic, chicken flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola...

It seems that this will be left to individuals, and in a known, neoliberal style, main actors who shape response to the pandemic will stick to the following position: adult learners are mature and it is up to them to learn and educate themselves even in a life-important issues. According to Schram, «people are expected to practice personal responsibility by investing in their own human capital to make themselves less of a burden on society as a whole or face the consequences of a heightened disciplinary regime» (2018, 308). The same way the responsibility for the jobs and employment was 'transferred' to the individuals through the

concepts of ‘employability’ and ‘flexicurity’ (while the economy and industry shifted to what J. Varoufakis 2021 called «techno-feudalism»), their health and resilience are now seen as a purely individual matter. Some new coined concepts, such as ‘healthicurity’ or ‘healthability,’ might emerge as a result.

The concept that individual adaptability is essential for a healthy lifestyle has been criticized as having a neoliberal nature by Maksimović (2021). Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, Lemke explains that «the strategy of rendering individual subjects ‘responsible’ (and also collectives, such as families, associations, etc.) entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc. and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of ‘self-care’ » (2001, 201). This is precisely what has happened with the neoliberal approach to the pandemic. Even vaccination, which could have relieved social tensions, has been framed as an individual responsibility. The state has fulfilled its duty by providing the opportunity for vaccination, and any failure to get vaccinated is deemed the fault of individuals.

Another aspect of the pandemic that has not received enough attention in current educational content is the global and political nature of health. While earlier teaching material for public health professionals, such as the Global Health Education Competencies Tool Kit by Astle et al. (2015), touches on this, there is a need to delve further into the North-South divide and health in different political-economic contexts to better understand the varied effects of the pandemic. The short tweet by Damian Barr: «We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm» has been doing the rounds of social media, as well as his explanation that «some are in super-yachts. Some have just the one oar» (Barr 2020). We are in the same storm (COVID-19-storm), but we are hit in a very different way and the consequences are vastly different for different communities and countries. While physical distancing was a kind of responsible behaviour for Europe, North America or Australia, it was not possible for many communities and countries, especially in the Global South, but also in remote areas, cities and disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the North.

It is imperative to note that when preventive measures become social norms that are reluctant to any contextualization or critical reflection, physical distancing can easily lead to social distancing and consequently increase existing gaps in the society or create new ones. Physical distancing, avoiding gathering and working from home are luxuries that millions cannot afford, so calling for such might be cynical (Popović 2020).

The pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of masses of people and a big number of countries, and raised the question of preconditions that led to massive suffering in some parts of the world.

For populations that make their daily living working outside, not adhering to physical distancing rules is a matter of survival rather than irresponsible behaviour. Many vulnerable groups have a very high risk of unemployment,

as well as threats to their livelihoods (especially for farmers, small and micro enterprises...). Working from home is a kind of 'luxury' available only for a small number of privileged people and a few countries (Popović 2020).

Resilience has become a buzzword in discussions and plans for pandemic recovery and building back better. UNESCO defines system resilience as «building and reinforcing the preparedness of the education system to anticipate, respond to and mitigate the effects of current and future crises» (2020, 2). However, it is mostly conceptualized as a normalization process that addresses learning losses, incorporates more digital technologies, and prepares for the next crisis.

The underlying assumption in the discourse of resilience appears to be that the world is beyond our control ... In other words, we should only try to find the best way to adapt and thus overcome the troubles. This takes away the personal agency of creating and influencing the society. Such an adaptable subject is reflexive and takes responsibility for his/her own well-being. This position can hinder community and political engagement, as the problem is not located within the structures that produce radical uncertainty, but within the person (Maksimović 2021).

In the more global context, it reminds of Schram's explanation of moralistic and tutorial dimensions of neoliberal social welfare, which is «focused on telling the poor how to behave more so than providing them with needed assistance» (2018, 313).

The crossroad for adult education in the coming time is indeed a challenging one. While it is important to prepare people to react, protect themselves, and develop capacities to face problems alone or with the community, education should not just stress the feeling of coming catastrophe and increase uncertainty and feeling of being threatened and endangered, while the question of decreased access to public services remains untouched. In other words: is education only a toll to deal with the health emergency? Or should it go deeper and address the structural and systemic inequalities that hit stronger and multiply when the crises wipe out the tiny net of social support and exacerbate the impact of crises?

The discussion on health and education as public services is often silenced by the health emergency, but also by the continuous tendency in last decade to undermine the requirements for more responsibility of the governments and expectations of welfare state. A range of neoliberal measures trying to reduce the burdens of the state and to shift both financial burden and moral responsibility to individuals, did leave serious marks on readiness of the state, social structures and system to cope with the pandemic. This hypertrophy of market logic and privatisation of health system, even in the developed European countries, have ruined the capacity of the health systems to deal with the pandemic. For example, massive privatisation of hospitals in Italy and Spain (Disamistade 2020; Hedgecoe 2020) and drastically reduced number of hospital beds and staff in Germany (Busse and Nimptsch 2021) are only some examples of the consequences of privatisation and marketisation of health system, that shape countries' response to crises.

The call for truly transformative education, which became quite loud in the last few years, should mean (in the context of health education) more than collecting skills, competencies and knowledge needed for personal maintenance and betterment of health; it requires questioning the social structures, the state's role and the responsibilities in the field of health, it requires challenging the economic and social models that are not adequate for the needs of the majority of the population, and it demands to put human well-being before profit – not only in crisis situations, but as a way to prevent or mild them.

3. Adult Education and Citizenship

The COVID-19 pandemic has been referred to as not only «a biological and health emergency. It is also a political emergency, an economic emergency and a social emergency intertwined. Its educational dynamics and forms of emergency weave through these larger processes [...]» (NORRAG 2021, 8). Initially, many restrictions imposed by states were accepted with little question; however, the adequacy of these restrictions was later questioned. While reliable estimations were lacking in the first phase, recent research shows a decline in democracy in many countries around the globe. «The volume of repressive responses to COVID-19 in both dictatorships and democracies reflects a growing global trend toward authoritarianism, which features the politicization of natural crises» (Slipowitz 2021). Freedom House, a reliable source, confirms: «Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have eroded the essential pillars of democracy in countries around the world, creating a crisis for global freedom» (Reputzi and Slipowitz 2020, 3). Furthermore, they state: «As a lethal pandemic, economic and physical insecurity, and violent conflict ravaged the world in 2020, democracy's defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes, shifting the international balance in favour of tyranny» (Reputzi and Slipowitz 2021, 1).

Many countries have used the pandemic to quash opposition, violate human rights, especially those of vulnerable groups, cut freedom of expression, and harass and arrest social media users and political opponents. Lockdowns, restrictions on mobility, and limited use of public spaces have caused a decline in civic activism, reduced freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of speech. Many governments used the pandemic as an excuse for authoritarian measures and violent actions, but even in countries with long-standing democracies, discussions are taking place about the line that can or mustn't be crossed when it comes to the rights of governments over citizens. «For the general population's sake, political elites undertake actions that would be hardly imaginable (and even less acceptable) under normal circumstances, especially in democratic societies (though perhaps not in illiberal democracies)» (Vankovska 2020, 72).

The imposed limits and measures can be considered a legitimate response to a public health threat, assuming they are proportionate, not long-lasting, and non-discriminatory. However, questions remain about what constitutes disproportionate government power, what constitutes discrimination, and where and

how freedom should be limited. These are questions that have not found good answers even at the theoretical level in the discussion among philosophers (see for example Peters 2020).

In this dispute, the Italian philosopher G. Agamben came dangerously close to espousing conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, his warning that there is a «tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government» should be taken seriously, given that this is precisely what is happening in many countries. This view is supported by a range of sources (see Reputzi and Slipowitz 2020, 2021; Friedersdorf 2021; Council of Europe 2020). The normalization of otherwise unacceptable practices and the disciplining of citizens are reminiscent of the ideas of Michel Foucault, as presented in Lemke's essay (2001) on Foucault's neoliberal governmentality and self-disciplined citizen, and the birth of biopolitics. Similarly, in his book *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World* (2020), the famous philosopher S. Žižek advocates accepting restrictions and deprivations derived from the pandemic as a new reality. However, this attitude has been heavily criticized by C. Herrera de la Fuente, who warns that «a kind of permanent state of exception can be established, in which confinements, curfews and extreme police surveillance will be constant», that the 'novel' coronavirus might be «the perfect excuse to exploit fear in its maximum expression with media hysteria on a massive, global scale» and invites to question and «activate again our critical reasoning before promulgating compliance with the standards that are implemented worldwide, even realizing that there is only a minute level of ethical commitment and solidarity with others» (2021, 9, 5). Similarly, B. Vankovska warns about the dramatic decrease in critical thinking and about self-censorship: «Even the most lucid analysts have joined the chorus: it's not the right time for regular political debates and blame games, now when people die and everyone is under threat we should stand united and obey the health authorities' orders» (2020, 73).

In this situation, instead of taking position, adult education can play an important role by equipping people for discussion, providing knowledge, arguments, historical, analytical, and comparative tools to participate in the debate and ensuing decision-making. Throughout history, the relationship between the state/government and citizens has been a constant process of negotiation, where the lines and limits have been discussed and changed, both in peaceful times and in times of crisis. Such discussions and participation in decision-making are always important, not just under favourable circumstances. Adult education has the task of helping people overcome a passive position as mere objects of actions and measures and becoming active participants in the process, making informed decisions or grounded demands. Additionally, it is essential to create awareness that this must be an ongoing process, not just in times of upheaval and disruption. Active citizenship means not just voting once every four years and being obedient in times of crisis; it means permanent activity in creating the body of social knowledge, enabling channels of dialogue, and strengthening agency through education.

During the pandemic, various mechanisms were applied to ‘normalize’ unusual behavioural practices related to the pandemic, and many of these practices are still required, thereby transforming them into established social norms. The set of values behind the universalization of these practices is not sufficiently challenged or put up for open discussion, so at least harmful side-effects could be addressed. This is necessary for the protection of common interests, human rights, minority rights, as well as preserving solidarity, community cooperation, and maintaining some level of civic activism and political reflection.

Another aspect highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic is the need for global citizenship education to expand its scope to include a broader range of topics and tasks. This includes raising awareness about the importance of upholding human rights worldwide, particularly during the pandemic, and

awareness towards the ways in which we participate in democratic societies and decision making. Also central is sharing information and raising awareness about the global issues of sustainable development, anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation that could cause or encourage the spread of new diseases (i.e.: large-scale deforestation, habitat degradation and fragmentation, agriculture intensification, trade in species and plants, eating habits etc.) (Popović 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic has also highlighted the resurgence of nationalism, which has been fuelled by fear and anxiety during times of crisis.

India, Brazil, Hungary ... Regimes that openly profess militant nationalism are among the hardest hit by the pandemic. However, outside of these countries, Covid-19 has given rise to nationalistic variants in crisis management policies, with varying degrees of effectiveness [...] All over the world, national withdrawal was proposed as an emergency solution, triggering the closure of borders at rates and in ways that were specific to individual nations, even when they belonged to the Schengen area (Badie 2021).

Nationalism has been used as a narrative to interpret the crisis, with some attributing a nationality to the virus and finding ‘another nation’ to blame. Others have returned to the old concept of national security, which is limited to a national scope. The pandemic has also fuelled economic nationalism, vaccine nationalism, and competitions in pandemic measures, offering a wide range of possibilities for populist movements across the political spectrum.

Denouncing the illegitimacy and inefficiency of institutions, technocrats and scholars, it values a reference to the people immediately conceived in reference to the nation, even to the purity of identity, thus enshrining a triple advantage. It is easy to create a scapegoat where migrants, foreigners and globalization are intermingled. It is easy to close the borders as a low-cost solution (Badie 2021).

The intersection of adult education and the pandemic presents a complex challenge, as the emphasis on responsible behaviour and protecting oneself and others can inadvertently provide a platform or excuse for nationalist and populist

ideologies. However, adult education also holds the potential to cultivate new forms of solidarity and cooperation, foster critical reflection, and assist in the exploration of fresh sources of identity and meaning. According to Antonsich (2020), the crisis has intensified feelings of national exceptionalism and solidarity. Nonetheless, adult education can expand the spectrum of possibilities for identity development and facilitate the process of coping with fears and evaluating the temporary nature of changes that may be frightening to individuals.

The early period of the pandemic crisis revealed some hybrid form of medical nationalism, economic nationalism, and everyday nationalism. However, the common crisis has also heightened the importance of regional solidarity, and reinforces a strengthening of cross-national cooperation and multilateral institutions (Wang 2021, 20).

This is another cross-road for adult education and contradictory generator of alternative perspectives.

Another disturbing trend during the pandemic has been the widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and superstitions. While not a new phenomenon, their consequences have been particularly damaging during the COVID-19 crisis, impeding an appropriate response. The shift towards online learning and alternative sources of information has facilitated the dissemination of unverified and potentially hazardous ideas. This problem cannot be solely attributed to a lack of critical knowledge, as it also represents an exaggerated 'explosion' of critical thinking that disregards fundamental scientific truths and social reliability.

Like any danger, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and prejudices patiently await fertile ground where they can multiply, develop, and spread. Their existence is undeniable, and their power is destructive, especially when they emerge during times of crisis. The pandemic took us all by surprise, capturing our attention unexpectedly and leaving us unprepared. While the scientific community made every effort to address the new situation, such processes take time, leaving ample space for the aforementioned dangers to gladly fill. Their power takes various forms, but two particularly devastating aspects can be highlighted. The first relates to the erosion of trust in science, scientists, and the scientific system and method. By trivializing the scientific approach, it creates an opening for untested (and unverifiable) delusions disguised as revolutionary and original ideas and theories. Additionally, the other side of the coin involves an extreme and harmful position that rigidly upholds positivistic science as the sole viable approach to finding solutions, without considering alternatives or individual and exceptional cases. Both of these aspects enable the infiltration of malicious, fear-based, and often lucrative forms of human thought that present themselves as new or alternative approaches, promising definitive and accurate answers.

To address this problem, adult education can provide reliable information, science education, promote media literacy and critical thinking, but its efficacy is limited during crises. Instead, the emphasis should be on developing a more stable value system that prevents the outbreak of these phenomena in times of

crisis, and offering individuals opportunities for personal growth and connections with their communities. This could help individuals to deal with uncertainties, with greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence navigate better ambiguities and insecurities. Through fostering dialogue and community engagement, the spaces could be created for individuals to engage in meaningful dialogue with others who hold different views. This can help to build empathy, understanding, and mutual respect and provide opportunities for individuals to learn from diverse perspectives.

In summary, adult education has a crucial role to play in navigating the complex intersection of the pandemic and education, and must actively promote responsible behaviour, critical thinking, and social cohesion.

The field of adult education is presented with the choice of either becoming a part of desperate efforts to address the crises as they unfold or taking a proactive approach towards the creation of a 'new normal'. The latter would involve an examination of the failures of education concepts, paradigms, and approaches that have proven to be ineffective and providing transformative perspectives based on current lessons learned. This is perfectly expressed in the recent UNESCO's document, which is created with the awareness of the possible consequences of the health crisis:

We need a new social contract for education that can repair injustices while transforming the future. This new social contract must be grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity. It must encompass an ethic of care, reciprocity, and solidarity. It must strengthen education as a public endeavour and a common good (UNESCO 2021a).

4. Adult Education and Technology

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a dramatic and apparent transformation in the practices of adult education, characterized by a shift to the virtual space and a heavy reliance on digital and information and communication technology (ICT) tools. The urgent need to address the learning losses and formulate mitigation strategies prompted a massive utilization of online platforms, tools, and applications. As a result, non-formal and informal adult learning and education have flourished, and the internet has become a vast repository of knowledge and information for acquiring new skills and solving emerging problems.

Digital technology has enabled the learning process to continue to a significant extent and compensate for some of the individual and social losses in the education sector. Some potentials of technology that existed even before the COVID-19 interruption were 'discovered' and extensively used. Even resistant 'old fashioners' who were initially resistant to digital learning embraced the online realm and acknowledged its numerous advantages. The term 'Zoomification'

became a byword for this new phenomenon, making home chair and screen the biggest learning space and educational unit in the history.

As a result of this remarkable achievement, ICT has not only been extolled but also deified and proclaimed as the ‘silver bullet’ for most of the learning problems and losses during and after the pandemic. UNESCO and the Global Education Coalition advocate for Education and Technological Transformations for Human-centered recovery (UNESCO 2021b), while research praises the potential of ICT technology to bridge the learning gaps and reach marginalized groups: «The strategic role of information and communication technologies (ICTs, in view of what has happened worldwide over the first six months of the pandemic in 2020) in contributing towards the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations» has been underlined (Lázaro Lorente et al. 2021). There are numerous calls to integrate digital skills and online learning methods into teacher training programs, integrate ICT and digital skills into studies, and launch projects that aim to increase the utilization of ICT in schools and education (Manco-Chavez et al. 2020)¹.

Despite numerous researches warning about the risks of overuse or over-reliance on digital technology in education, technological enthusiasm is prevailing. The World Economic Forum states: «Research suggests that online learning has been shown to increase retention of information and take less time, meaning the changes coronavirus has caused might be here to stay» (Li and Lalani 2020). The OECD acknowledges certain limitations but maintains an optimistic stance, as they perceive the limitations and risks to be primarily of a technical nature.

[...] the crisis provides a powerful test of the potential of learning online
 [...] Expanding adult training provision through online learning would have significant advantages. In particular, online learning could help reach a much bigger number of learners with a smaller investment in education infrastructure, making it a cost-effective solution in the context of rising unemployment due to the COVID-19 crisis [...] Issues of inclusiveness would also need to be tackled to ensure that all adults can benefit from online learning, including adults with lower digital skills and limited access to computer and internet facilities, adults with less self-motivation and those requiring blue-collar training. Lessons learnt during the COVID-19 crisis can help address the existing limitations to realise the full potential of online learning (OECD 2020).

The promotion of a technology-driven approach to education is not a new phenomenon, as evidenced by the inclusion of digital skills as one of the three main competency groups measured by PISA and PIAAC for several years. Examples of attempts to replace teachers with digital technology in certain con-

¹ One extreme case is the use of gamification methods, even in fields such as adult literacy. Computer games adapted for mobile phones are promoted as a valid replacement for existing literacy methods, reducing literacy to a mere skill (Session 4 of the UNESCO’s International Literacy Day – International Conference on ‘Literacy and Skills Development’ – UNESCO 2018).

texts, such as the Liberian project to use scripted education via tablet computers, have also been reported (Brown-Martin 2016), as have similar endeavours in developing countries to outsource education to for-profit corporations (AFP 2017). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated this trend, elevating it to a central topic in discussions about education during the pandemic, as well as in recovery plans and envisioning the future of education in a post-COVID-19 world

The application of digital technologies has apparently taken up the most space in the conception of all educational responses to the pandemic. With uncritical enthusiasm or with cautious recommendations, online education is the first, and perhaps the last, response of education to a pandemic (Popović 2021).²

Much of the criticism directed towards digital education pertains to its ‘technical’ aspects, such as the digital gap, lack of digital infrastructure and skills, and the fact that half of the world’s population does not have internet access (ITU 2018). However, some researchers and practitioners have attempted to draw attention to other limitations and risks associated with digital education. These include the absence of social-emotional³ and embodied learning, reduced opportunities to teach critical thinking, creativity, citizenship, interculturalism, and tolerance, as well as issues with motivation, communication, limited use of interactive methods, and cooperative learning, among others. Furthermore, the learner-centered approach, previously considered a ‘golden rule’ of education, has almost disappeared from educational narratives, with the focus shifting to digital triggers, rewards, and games, while the requirement for strict data protection has limited the scope for personalized teaching approaches. Will a ‘human-centered recovery’ (UNESCO) be achievable when a human-centered approach has to rely on padlets and shared screens, digital triggers and rewards, computer games, and the digital skills of teachers? While there may be greater possibilities when working with small groups, teaching large groups of learners from different locations (which is often highlighted as an advantage of digital teaching) may lead us back to traditional forms of teaching with their inherent limitations and exclusions.

Moreover, even if teaching can be effectively conducted through screens, what about training and skills acquisition? How do we address emotional learning and develop social skills? What about peace education and fostering tolerance?

This crossroad is probably the biggest challenge for adult education, because of the powerful interests that are involved in deciding about the direction of future development. N. Klein, famous for her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), where she elaborated the ways that neoliberal capi-

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

³ Social-emotional learning was one of the top themes until recently! See for example: Nissem Global Briefs: Educating for the social, the emotional and the sustainable (Smart et al. 2019) and SEL for SDGs: Why Social and Emotional Learning is necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO MGIEP 2019).

talism exploits crises and natural disasters, wrote already about the persisting attempt of big technological companies to seize the opportunity to extend their reach and power, most recent one being COVID-19 pandemic:

[...] something resembling a coherent pandemic shock doctrine is beginning to emerge. Call it the Screen New Deal. Far more hi-tech than anything we have seen during previous disasters, the future that is being rushed into being as the bodies still pile up treats our past weeks of physical isolation not as a painful necessity to save lives, but as a living laboratory for a permanent – and highly profitable – no-touch future (Klein 2020).

We are facing here two competing paradigms of future, human nature and education. Future visions of adult learning and education are rooted in two main contradicting paradigms:

Thanatos and Eros policies have both shown great power over people's mindsets and behavior, but the debate between their respective proponents is not over yet. There are romanticized versions of a virus whose role is to awaken mankind's conscience but also *Brave New World* or 1984 versions of the COVID crisis (Vankovska 2020, 73).

The idea of technological dystopia (see for example: Foucault, Agamben, Benvenuto 2020) in education gets strengthened by the global policy makers: not only that the emergence of digital policies became dominant and recommended to the governments by UNESCO, OECD and The World Bank, but they also promote artificial intelligence (AI) which is becoming a mainstream. In 2021 UNESCO promotes AI as «a common good to transform education»⁴ (UNESCO 2021c) and doesn't limit its recommendation to increased use of AI and other tools in education, but raises the bar: AI should redefine not only education, but humanity:

The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is part and parcel of the digital transformation of all facets of our societies – from our daily lives to the world of work and to public services, including education. Specifically, the AI-powered digitalization of learning is not only about digital transmission of 'traditional' forms of knowledge. It is also increasingly about the digitalization of knowledge production and representation, driven by machine learning and increasingly powerful algorithms. In general, the rapid growth of human-AI collaboration and the digital transformation of our societies have profound implications for what it means to be human and how we relate to each other and to technology. The traditional conceptions of humanism need to be reframed, and a digital humanism is being defined and will guide our education and development efforts (UNESCO 2021c, 1).

⁴ Already in 2020 (7-8 December), International Forum *AI and the Futures of Education* was held under the title *Developing Competencies for the AI Era*, announcing the ambition of transforming human society (UNESCO 2021d, 12).

Additional calls to use the technology in the service of people to enhance human capacity, protect human rights and ensure sustainable development, doesn't really indicate how AI in education can help the world facing the serious global problems that UNESCO itself lists based on the Report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education: «Widening social and economic inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource use that exceeds planetary boundaries, democratic backsliding and disruptive technological automation». The same Commission, while agreeing about the «tremendous transformative potential in digital technologies», warns that «we have not yet figured out how to deliver on these many promises» and that «the challenge of creating decent human-centred work is about to get much harder as Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation and structural transformations remake employment landscapes around the globe» (UNESCO 2021a, 3). And not only employment landscape – it intervenes in education, in social tissue, in human bodies and humanity in general.

Adding to these concerns, the next UNESCO forum on AI is co-organized with China, a country that is known a 'champion' in using advanced technology to control and surveil its citizens, and for exporting these practices to other countries (such as Serbia; Gomez 2021). «An enduring legacy of the COVID19 crisis will be the incremental development of surveillance technologies, ostensibly purposed to identify the threat and spread of a pandemic, giving birth to what amounts to the pandemic surveillance state» (Kampmark 2020, 59).

The pandemic has also accelerated the adoption of technology-driven practices, with ICT-based learning touted as a magical solution. However, this 'normalization' of techniques represents a shift from Foucault's 'disciplinary technology' to a realm where the limitations imposed by the pandemic are taken as axiomatic and inflexible. This trend warrants further analysis and reflection.

A true historical juncture! Edward O. Wilson, American sociobiologist, said: «The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology» (2009). The overwhelming emphasis on technology often eclipses the importance of addressing the first two elements, thereby underscoring the enduring significance of adult education. This task remains crucial not only during times of crises but precisely because of the diverse range of crises.

5. Concluding Remarks

It remains to be seen whether the COVID-19 pandemic will bring about a paradigm shift in education, but there are several indicators pointing in that direction. Kuhn's definition of paradigm shift can be applied beyond the field of science, as we witness the need for new explanations and approaches in adult education, and the incapability of existing ones to address current and emerging societal needs, without understanding it too broad.

The pandemic has brought about dramatic changes, and their depth, duration, and persistence will inevitably impact the role of education. Moreover, some of

the basic assumptions of educational paradigms have been questioned, such as the exclusive focus on cognitive skills, the reductive understanding of human nature, and the dominance of technology over content and values in education. As a result, we are witnessing substantial changes in the role of teachers, the replacement of traditional teaching methods with digital tools, and the emergence of contradictory new assumptions. The main elements of the system have changed and their functioning too; new approaches are being offered, but they are also contradicting each other. Do we need more of the 'old', just better and deeper, or do we need to create a new educational realm? Should we explore the less travelled roads or build completely new ones?

This dilemma highlights the need for a 'learning to change' approach in the global education world. From the perspective of Jack Mezirow (1978), the COVID-19 pandemic might be a 'disorienting dilemma', that will inspire critical reflection, exploration of alternatives and new roles, as well as capacity development for the new stage and integration. Crises can be an opportunity for change and improvement.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic may be viewed as a perspective change or paradigm shift, one thing is certain: passive reactions by the adult education sector to the ongoing debates and discussions between conflicting approaches and interests will make it a blind follower of changes in other sectors and a servant of future directions of development within the imposed paradigms. The educational experiences and practices during COVID-19 provide valuable insights and opportunities for critical reflection. It is crucial to shift research focus beyond common issues like evaluating user satisfaction with platforms such as Zoom or MSTeams and delve into substantial pedagogical and andragogical inquiries. They have the potential to provide a significant, influential, and well-informed perspective on the post-COVID-19 era, and to be a loud and grounded voice in the ongoing discussions about it.

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