

Supporting Teachers in the Transition towards Distance Education: Challenges and Means

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Abstract: During the lockdown as a result of the pandemic, it became necessary to deploy distance education in many countries, at all levels of education. This article presents the creation of a training course aimed at helping teachers to shift from in-person classes to distance learning. It highlights the issues and challenges encountered and pinpoints the first observable impacts of this course, as well as in-progress and upcoming developments.

Keywords: distance education, online learning, pandemic, transition.

Introduction

The pandemic and the resulting containment measures have served to expedite the development of telework and distance learning in most countries. While some educational institutions were well prepared to contend with this situation, in that they already offered distance courses or had already needed to adapt their instruction during previous pandemics (Lim et al, 2009), many others had to motivate their teachers and learners to change their practices.

Thus, in Quebec, with the exception of Téluq University and Cégep à distance, whose courses are all provided via distance education, and of a few universities whose online course offerings are being deployed gradually, the majority of institutions were caught unprepared. Teachers and learners alike were called upon to do their best to reinvent education from their home environment, which resulted in a variety of practices and testimonials emphasizing their feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction being relayed by the media.

Quebec's Ministry of Education therefore approached Téluq University to create a distance learning course to help teachers in transitioning from in-person to distance teaching. In this article, we seek to describe the process of creating this course and the challenges that were met in order to achieve it, before concluding with the impacts and perspectives of the course.

Lockdown: A Favourable Context for Fostering Innovation in Distance Education?

While distance education (DE) has existed since the middle of the 19th century, it is the need to continue teaching during the lockdown period that has made many teachers and learners aware not only of its existence but also of its potential and limitations. By wanting to gain some perspective on the practices implemented by teachers, it was possible to see various ways in which this situation could be a source of pedagogical innovation.

In fact, two primary educational engineering models were tested: on the one hand, the model created in the 1970s brought by the Open University to the United Kingdom or other equivalent models



elsewhere in the world, such as T luq University in Quebec, and, on the other hand, the model that emerged in universities in the 2000s, with the development of Learning Management Systems (LMSs). In the first case, the DE model, sometimes characterised as industrial, involves a large number of stakeholders striving to conduct needs analysis, to implement the instructional design of courses, to create content and learning activities, including their mediatised forms, and to coach students and evaluate their assignments. This model, initially designed for correspondence courses, was gradually adapted to the Internet Age (Papi, 2016), whereas, the second model, which was more artisanal, was developed when the availability of platforms allowed teachers to put what they wanted online fairly easily, with no more support than an LMS training course implemented at the institution in question, or with *ad hoc* advice from techno-pedagogues. On the one hand, the process of creating distance learning courses based on an industrial model is lengthy but leads to high-quality courses overall; the process of implementing courses following the artisanal model, on the other hand, is much faster but is likely to result in courses of varying quality.

In the context of the pandemic, the first model proved to be too slow to create distance education courses corresponding to all of the in-person courses offered by a particular institution. As for the second model, it allows teachers who have already integrated the use of an LMS into their practices to quickly turn to DE, especially when they had already developed activities of this nature. However, not all teachers are accustomed to using a DE platform, and some have tended to spend too much time researching effective technologies for sharing content, or communicating and multiplying the number of resources proposed to learners without always having a coherent plan to advance learning. In fact, as underscored by Peraya and Peletier (2020), when teachers do not fully grasp the unique features of DE, they may tend to reproduce frontal, face-to-face teaching methods combined with the mediatisation of current technologies. Thus, during lockdown, many teachers turned towards what seemed the most familiar to them, by trying to deliver virtual classes in the same way as in-person teaching, while simultaneously deploring the limitations of the system, rather than re-examining the educational practices implemented. Similarly, it has been a frequent practice for teachers to send homework to learners by email, indicating textbook exercises to be completed. Finally, in order to be able to perpetuate traditional assessment carried out under limited-time supervision, online assignments or exams available for a limited period have often been paired with a videoconferencing system requiring the camera to be turned on. In short, despite a few innovative practices leveraging the imagination of teachers and their desire to help their learners as much as possible, far from implementing a new model of educational engineering or "Education 4.0" (Salmon, 2019), many teachers have primarily managed through resourcefulness and do-it-yourself solutions.

It is therefore understandable why Quebec's Ministry of Education entrusted T luq University with the mandate to create a training course enabling teachers to become familiar with distance education. However, for a university that has long-term production processes and a range of experience in providing training about the particulars of distance education to university students specializing in this field, it has proven to be a considerable challenge to roll out a course, in an urgent situation, intended for teachers from preschool to university level, with varied skills and needs. We therefore propose to highlight different observations and reflections that marked the creation of this course.

Creating a Survival Kit for Diving into Distance Education

Familiarizing teachers with distance education involved constructing a course intended to equip teachers for distance education, both from a pedagogical and a technological standpoint. In the lockdown context and given the size of the targeted audience (more than 130,000 teachers in Quebec), this course could be viewed as a survival kit for navigating the fraught transition from in-class teaching to distance education, which was achieved by means of asynchronous distance education between the end of April and the beginning of August 2020. We will review the two main challenges of this course, which is entitled *J'enseigne à distance* [*I teach at a distance*]*—namely, to meet the needs of many teachers at various educational levels and, for this purpose, to quickly create a training course and make it available—by drawing attention to the directions taken by this project.*

First Challenge: To Meet the Needs of Teachers

In order to foster adaptation to the needs of teachers, an agreement was reached to develop an asynchronous training course that is available at all times, is accessible free of charge and consists of microprograms that are separate from each other and comprised of relatively short modules (approximately one hour long). In addition, given that the idea of creating this course occurred when teachers had already started teaching at a distance, it was decided that rather than basing the training on a traditional course structure—1. instructional design 2. mediatization, 3. support, 4. assessment—it would be better to reverse the order a little, with the most urgent requirement being to offer the support microprogram to help teachers with course activities, and next to put the mediatization microprogram online, and only afterwards the instructional design microprogram, and finally, the assessment microprogram, which was the last one to be implemented, as it seemed less pressing in a local context, where many exams had been cancelled.

In addition, a decision was made to organise the course via three pathways according to level of education— preschool/primary, secondary and higher education. Thus, while the four microprograms have a similar orientation, the content of each of the modules included in these microprograms is specifically designed for a particular level of education. For example, given that the asynchronous learning mode is not adapted to young students, the course proposed for the preschool/primary level is more focused on what can be achieved in a synchronous mode, whereas for higher education, both synchronous and asynchronous communication modes are used. It was also necessary to seek out technologies that are accessible to the various teachers involved and to offer them ways not to design distance education courses that follow a traditional instructional design process, but to adapt courses initially designed to be given in the classroom such that they present a wide palette of types of assessment and marking methods that can be put into practice when necessary.

Finally, it seemed appropriate to reassure teachers and alleviate their fears about teaching at a distance, such as apprehensions of being overwhelmed by the vast array of technologies, and of finding it more difficult to detect cases of cheating during exams. Hence the idea of calling on many stakeholders in educational settings to participate in the creation of some course content or in conducting interviews to enable teachers to have concrete examples of practices implemented by colleagues. In addition, in order to help teachers to support their learners, different resources are also recommended. Thus, a course entitled *J'enseigne à distance* was created in this lockdown context and is relayed through microprograms aimed at providing support at the primary and secondary levels.

Comprised of five video vignettes intended for parents supporting their primary- or secondary-level children who are taking distance courses, this training course can also be disseminated to parents through teachers who consider it to be relevant, just as works intended for distance students are sometimes cited in higher education microprograms so that teachers can recommend them to their students as needed. We now understand that this training course, initially designed as a survival kit, is ultimately a highly useful resource—one that draws on basic principles of distance education and that was created with the participation of many stakeholders.

Second Challenge: To Quickly Create the Training Course and Make it Available

In an attempt to mitigate the slowness associated with a distance education production model that is both industrial in terms of the division of work, and artisanal in that it was adapted to the individual needs of each course created and to the vision of all the professors who served as content experts, the immediate decision made was to put large teams to work at all levels. Thus, many professors, technopedagogues, proofreaders, graphic designers, and integrators worked simultaneously so that the microprograms could be created and put online as quickly as possible. However, in spite of the labour power deployed in this manner, the training course could not be made available online as fast as we wanted due to various limitations.

First of all, bringing teams to work together when they are not accustomed to doing so is a challenge in itself, particularly since the need to develop the training course quickly did not allow for the various collaborators to share their representations of their work and working methods upstream. We needed to begin work immediately, and therefore coordination and problem-solving had to be done as we went along, sometimes involving changes in what was being created. In addition, the audience of T luq University is generally restricted to a limited number of learners. In the context of the course *J'enseigne   distance*, to the extent that this training course targets a large number of teachers and can be accessed free of charge by anyone who is interested in it, different technological solutions were contemplated, and several problems had to be resolved along the way to be sure that an online traffic surge could be supported.

Furthermore, to avoid the substantial task of identifying and presenting technological tools in each module and to remain focused on pedagogy, a toolbox listing the main technological tools used in education was created for the training course as a whole. In order to make it easier for teachers to use the tools, they are organised by category ("collaborative tools", for example), and the level of education for which they are used, their ease of mastery, language, cost and device compatibility are also specified and can serve as selection factors. In addition, links to existing tutorials are indicated for each tool.

Finally, since the training course modules were put online gradually as soon as they were created, to enable teachers to take advantage of them as soon as possible, it was also necessary to answer questions about the modules, while at the same time producing the rest of the training course. For instance, in response to requests from some teachers, a system for issuing certificates, not planned for initially, was designed when the first two modules were already on line. Thus, throughout the development of this multifaceted training course, the urgency of the situation had to be balanced with the needs of teachers and the desire to provide quality content.

Impacts and Perspectives

An initial observation is that this training course was eagerly anticipated. In fact, as soon as the first module was put online on May 4, traffic to the site was high (25,244 visitors) and three months later, as of August 3, we recorded a total of 120,469 visitors.

Thus, although the training course is accessible to everyone with no registration required, we are currently recording the number of subscribers to our mailing list (24,309 as of August 3) a figure that will certainly increase in the weeks to come, as people prepare for school to resume. In addition, it is interesting to note that, while the target audience is teachers in Quebec, and no advertising was therefore done outside of the province, people who have occupations other than teacher have subscribed, as have people living outside of Quebec. This can be seen on the map below (the darker the colour, the more visitors there are).

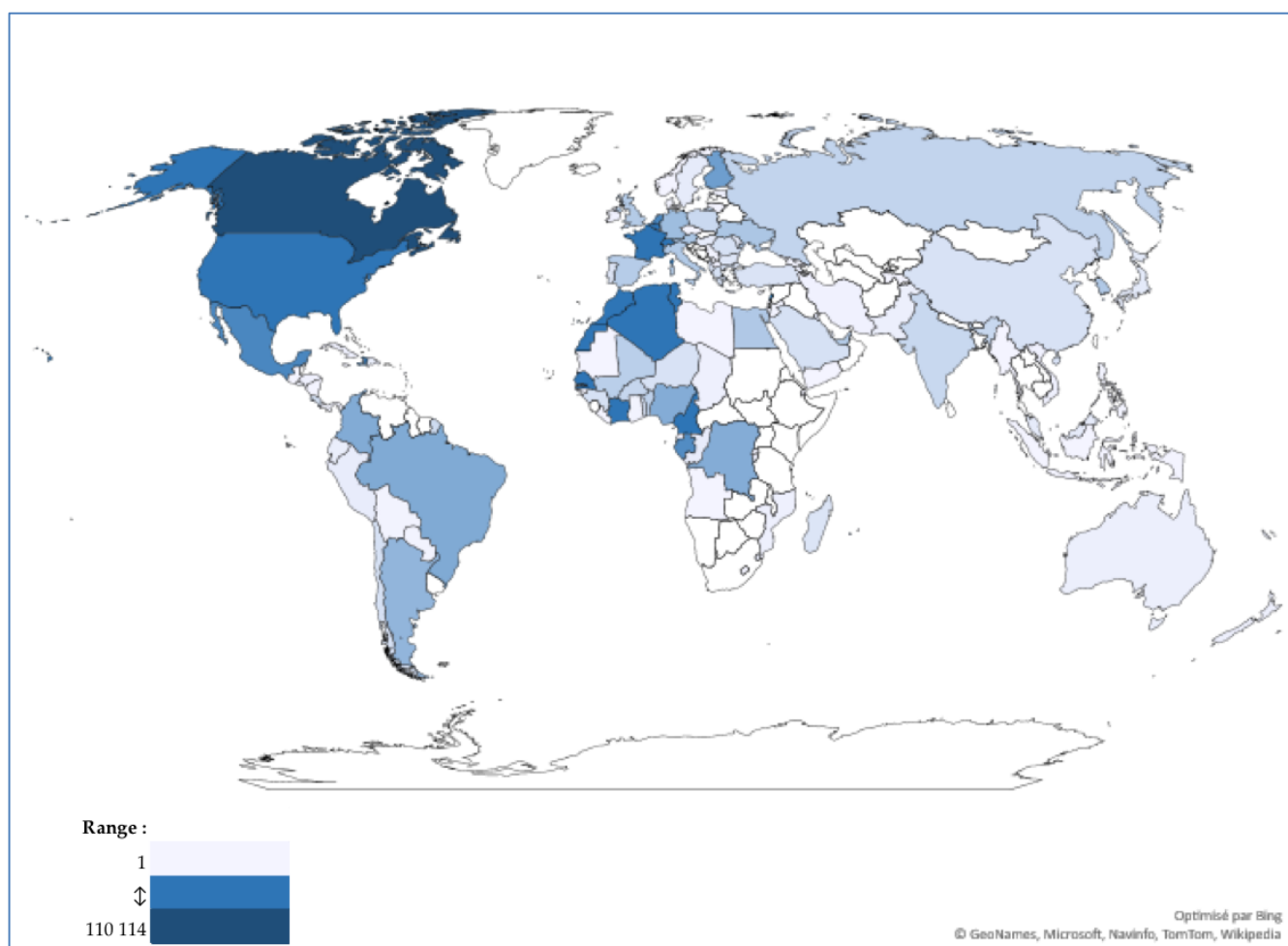


Figure 1: Locations of visitors worldwide between May 4 and August 3, 2020

With its focus on pedagogy and the fact that it lists an extensive selection of technological tools, this training course is therefore bound to contribute to the transition from in-person to distance learning around the globe and, in particular, to be useful in countries where the necessary expertise for creating such microprograms is lacking. International interest will therefore certainly grow with the upcoming English-language version.

One of the next decisions to be made will therefore be simply to translate or to adapt the different microprograms to the Canadian Anglophone context. The second solution is clearly preferable but all of the skilled tradespersons working to develop these microprograms have already fallen far behind in creating T luq University credit courses. Indeed, this unplanned training course became a priority as soon as it was commissioned, and the various stakeholders that worked to develop this course had to postpone planned activities and find the means to work without keeping track of their hours, despite the special circumstances of working remotely from home, and the need to improvise stages or make recordings using videoconferencing systems.

While almost all of the French microprograms are now available online, and we are currently supporting teachers who are taking the course by offering a few webinars or personal development opportunities, it is worth noting that the creation of *J'enseigne   distance*, which is aimed at helping teachers to make changes—and even break new ground—in their pedagogical practices, has also been a source for renewing practices and identifying processes that require efficiency improvements at an institution that has a proven track record in this training mode. Finally, it remains to be seen to what extent this training course will enable teachers to be inspired and supported in their techno-pedagogical practices, whatever the situation may be in the months to come.

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Cite this paper as: Papi, C. (2020). Supporting teachers in the transition towards distance education: Challenges and means. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 7(3), 467-472.