



The Teacher in the Digital World: New Roles, Representations, Perceptions

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Abstract

The fast development of the Internet and digital technologies has led to many fundamental transformations in the sphere of education and has challenged the traditional pillars of the brick-and-mortar school as an institution. In light of these processes, the present study aims to reveal the teacher's current position by studying their new roles, representations, and how they are perceived. The following insights are the result of case studies of 6 popular Bulgarian educational online platforms and Internet sites in their development for the period between 2019 and 2022 and include observations on the processes that go parallel in the Bulgarian educational institution. The research methods used in the present study include observation of online educational practices, content analysis of educational and media materials, as well as 45 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 8 creators of educational platforms, 12 teachers, 15 students, and 10 parents. The article aims to open a discussion on what the new roles of teachers in the Digital World are and how they may respond to society's new expectations. The first part of it analyses the change in the position of the teacher – from a central authority in the classroom to a guide who leads the learners through their way to knowledge. The second one regards the new need for teachers today to compete for their audience's attention. The last two parts raise a discussion about the balance between technological and human experience. They discuss the need for teachers to obtain deeper knowledge about the impact of technology on different spheres of the human world and underline the irreplaceable role of the teacher as a human being.

Keywords: education, Internet, teaching, paradigm shift, Bulgaria

1. Introduction

1.1 Education in the Internet age

It's widely agreed that the fast development of the Internet and digital technologies led to many fundamental transformations in the sphere of education. The education sphere has always been tightly connected with the development of communication technologies. Some of the turning points in their historical change - such as the invention of the printing press, the spread of television, and the emergence of the Internet, have had a great impact on the ongoing processes in education and changed perceptions of the learning and teaching process.

In today's world of globalization, fast development of communications, formation of new economic relations, and deinstitutionalization, the role of the state weakens and this places the educational institution of the school in a very different situation from the one it originated in. Education is no longer just an instrument of public power, but rather a sphere where many different actors and intentions meet. As Fazal Rizvi points out: "Given the dynamics of increasingly globalized social media, young people are also aware that formal institutions are no longer the only source from which they can access knowledge" (Rizvi, 2017, p. 2). New forms of online education appear and challenge the traditional pillars of the school institution, one of which is the position of the teacher. The democratic structure of the World Wide Web opens opportunities for the emergence of various actors who use the Internet intending to disseminate knowledge and educate others. Among them are not only the traditional knowledge-keepers (scholars, academics, teachers, experts) but different actors – both professionals and amateurs, with very different levels of expertise. This is a rather new situation that leads to transformations in the roles, representations, and social standing of the teachers as well as the way they are perceived by others.

1.2 Research overview

This article presents part of the findings of a Ph.D. research on the topic: "Non-institutional Educational Practices in The Bulgarian Virtual Space - New Enlighteners, Strategies, and Digital Resources". The aim of this broader research is to explore the question of how new digital technologies and particularly the Internet transform the traditional pillars of education. The present observations are based on the case study of the development of six very popular Bulgarian educational online platforms and sites in the period between 2019 and 2022 (the pandemic years). The current article presents only an aspect of the overall research by focusing on the new situation of the teacher – their new roles, representations, and the ways they are perceived in the world of digital technologies.

This study is based on the observation of teaching and learning practices within the chosen sites and platforms, content analysis of educational and advertising materials, as well as mass media materials reflecting the development of these platforms and sites. These observations are completed with 45 in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of the target audience – 12 teachers, 15 students, and 10 parents, as well as with 8 creators of educational online platforms and sites. All this is accompanied by some unstructured observation of processes that go parallel in the Bulgarian school institution under the pressure of the pandemic

reality. In the course of the research four aspects of the transformations in the roles, images, and perceptions of the teacher appeared to be particularly important. They are presented in the following parts of the article. Its first part “The Teacher as a Sage” discusses the transformation in the role of the teacher as a knowledge-keeper – from someone who is recognized as a main authority possessing the whole “wisdom” to someone who is “a guide on the side” and leads the knowledge seeker (the learner) through his own way. Here, as well as in the second part, the reference is towards Alison King’s text “From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side”. The second part of the article, “The Teacher on the Stage”, claims that teachers step off the stage in some sense but in the contemporary world they are in a situation to compete for the attention of their audience and in some way, they are challenged to act as “stars” as if they are in the spotlight on the stage. The third part of the article – “The Tech Teacher”, focuses on the technological competence needed in today’s world. This is seen in two aspects - the skills regarding the usage of technologies in class but also the deeper knowledge about technologies and their impact on different spheres of the human world. “The Human Teacher” is the last part which presents some of the “human” qualities of the teacher that appeared to be important for the respondents in the interviews. This last part of the article aims to give some arguments about the teacher’s irreplaceable role as a human being.

2. Teaching in a world of digital technologies

2.1 The teacher as a Sage

The transformation in the role of the teacher who cannot be perceived anymore as a Sage holding in their hands the Wholly Testimony is part of a bigger process, usually described as a “paradigm shift” in education. In her renowned article “From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side”, Alison King comments on the shift in the teacher’s position. She promotes the concept of “active learning” that helps students “move away from the reproduction of knowledge” and “become critical thinkers and creative problem solvers so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of the twenty-first century” (King, 1993, p. 30). It might be observed that in today’s world, this shift is even more enhanced by the Internet and its non-hierarchical web structure.

The change that the Internet brings to our society is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is perceived as an opportunity - for example how Rupert Wegerif sees it in his book “Dialogic: Education for the Internet Age” (Wegerif, 2013). In the first chapter of his book titled “The Challenge”, he sees the development of the Internet as a challenge that brings fundamental change but also opens new opportunities. Wegerif discusses the potential for education that the World Wide Web has, but points out that it supports another kind of education that is quite different from the education in schools, which is predominantly based on the printed text: “The concept of education afforded by print is a form of monologic which can be summarized as the transmission of true representations. The concept of education afforded by the Internet is a form of dialogic which can be summarized as participation in ongoing inquiry in an unbounded context. Understanding the shift from print to the Internet as a shift of underlying ways of thinking from monologic to dialogic can help us understand what is really happening to us now, which can help us to design the future together” (Wegerif, 2013, p. 1). On the other hand, the

new situation that the Internet creates is seen as a big challenge to our culture by the critics of the World Wide Web, one of which is Andrew Keen. In his book “The Cult of the Amateur. How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture” he describes the rise of a new actor - the knowledgeable “hobbyist”, or “the noble amateur”, and concludes: “On today’s Internet, however, amateurism, rather than expertise, is celebrated, even revered” (Keen, 2007, p. 36).

It is somehow expected that access to different sources of knowledge nowadays shakes the position of the teacher as a Sage. This can be seen as part of a larger process regarding the position of the knowledge-keepers in the contemporary world as a whole, which is conceptualized by many contemporary thinkers as a “decline of authority”. The emergence and development of online educational sites and platforms (outside the school institution), that can be used by students independently at home, has had a strong impact on the classroom and the work of the teacher.

It is interesting to see the ways teachers are engaged in the observed Bulgarian educational platforms and sites. The most obvious way of engagement is as a target group. As part of their advertising strategies, many of these platforms invite teachers to use them in the classroom. But except as a target group teachers may also be part of their teams – they are included in many of these projects as lesson developers. One example is “Ucha.se” (<https://www.ucha.se>), which is currently the most popular educational platform in Bulgaria. It has a huge team of teachers (more than a hundred) in different subjects who develop the scenarios for the animated educational videos and also answer questions, asked by students on the digital platform. Thus, their role in the platform might be seen as the role of the sage behind the curtains.

These examples reveal the complexity of the relations between educational platforms and the classroom. It’s true that virtual spaces with educational materials somehow put the expertise of the teacher in a competitive situation. The advertising rhetoric of the observed platforms and sites often promotes their educational materials as of a better quality - more “comprehensive” and “interesting”, than the lessons at school. An illustrative example is the slogan of “Ucha.se”: “The Lessons in an Interesting and Comprehensible Language”. At the same time, the educational platforms and sites acknowledge the expertise of the teachers in the school institution and seek ways for making use of it.

Teachers’ expertise in the web world turns out to be one of the topics which appear to be particularly important in the in-depth interviews as well. Most of the student, parent, and teacher respondents point to expertise in the subject as one of the most important requirements for the teacher today. Students share that they generally trust their teachers. When asked what they usually do when they need to better understand something regarding their lessons, they say that it depends on who the teacher is. The general feeling is that if they have trustworthy communication with the particular teacher, they would approach him/her. If there are circumstances that corrupt this dialogue (for example the lack of trust) they would prefer to turn to the Internet. Checking the information delivered by the teacher in class might be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it might be seen as a manifestation of critical thinking, of doubt as a part of the learning process. But on the other hand - it may reveal the problem of the undermined authority of the teacher.

It turns out that there is still a need for the teacher in the role of a Sage - but a “Sage” in a world of digital technologies. This new environment puts teachers in a situation of extreme competition with other sources of knowledge where they are not unquestioned authorities anymore. “The guide on the side”, described by Alison King (1997), might be seen as a sage, hidden behind the curtains, and this new position seems to require even more expertise - expertise in knowing how to wisely guide students in their surfing through the information web.

2.2 The teacher on the stage

Alison King uses the metaphor of “the Sage on the stage” to describe the role of the teacher in the traditional teaching-learning model where the teacher is the “central figure [...] the one who has the knowledge and transmits that knowledge to the students” (King, 1993, p.1) King points out that teachers need to step down from “the stage” and become guides among their students. In this part of the article the metaphor of “the stage” is used playfully to bring a reflection on the moments when teachers today step “under the spotlights” and get public attention. The aim is to open a discussion on how popularity influences teachers’ social standing.

The observed phenomena in this part of the text need to be understood in the local context of Bulgarian education where the teacher traditionally has an undermined social standing and a damaged image. This is due to many different reasons - economic, political, social, cultural, and even historical, but they need deeper analysis and will remain outside the interest of this text. In light of these social prerequisites, it is not surprising that the construction and dissemination of negative stereotype images of the teacher are quite popular. This for example can be seen in the advertising strategies of some of the observed platforms and sites. In their endeavor to distinguish the modern technological education that they promote from the brick-and-mortar classroom, they produce images of the teacher in the traditional classroom which evoke negative connotations. An illustrative example is a promotional video of the platform “Ucha.se” which depicts a woman teacher, dressed in brown, holding a whip in her left hand, which is hidden behind her back. With her right-hand forefinger, she is pointing to a student who seems to be frightened and ashamed. But we can also see the endeavor of some of the observed platforms to restore the image of teachers and to stress the importance of their role in society. During the pandemic, “Ucha.se” released several videos which carried the positive message of the social importance of the teachers’ everyday work in the classroom and which represented them in a positive light as guides supporting their students. One of these videos is dedicated to the teacher’s profession and tells about the challenges, responsibilities, and difficulties that teachers meet in the contemporary world. (Ucha.se, 2020)

An interesting PR strategy used in some Bulgarian educational projects is inviting a popular figure (“a star”) or somebody who is young, good-looking, and successful in a specific field, but non-professional in the field of education, to deliver a lesson or talk about the importance of school. An example of this strategy is a series of lessons, created again by “Ucha.se”, in which some Bulgarian stars are invited to “be the face” in the educational videos and “the voice” behind the animated characters. (Ucha.se, 2021) The lesson plans for the scenarios are created by real teachers who develop educational content. This example reveals an unexpected

meaning of the teachers' stepping down from the stage – it illustrates their withdrawal from the spotlights which gives way to other actors, who have popularity, to deliver messages created by teachers who remain in their shadow.

At the same time, we can also observe practices by which Bulgarian teachers become "stars". The effort of some teachers to build their virtual identities by using social media becomes more and more visible. An interesting story is that of the Bulgarian teacher Ralitza Bachvarova who created a profile in Tik-Tok and now has more than hundred and twenty thousand followers. This story was covered in the popular TV show "Zdravey, Bulgaria" on "Nova" television (Nikolaev, V. and Ivanova, M., 2022). It is worth mentioning that the rubric in which it was included is titled "Novite Izvestni" (or "The New Famous" if we translate it into English).

It is somehow expected that being popular by using virtual platforms that are loved by young people is a way to connect with them, but the interviewed student respondents are reticent about it. They generally find it a good idea but they note that in some situations this presence on social media might discredit the teacher. An interesting insight also suggests a student's comment that he doesn't want teachers to be present in his social networks because he wants to keep his freedom and not be monitored by teachers there. The interviewed teachers also express hesitation. Some of them pay attention to the fact that their image is much more vulnerable on social media and that they don't feel having much control over their representations there. They often tell stories of teachers who became subjects of mockery in the virtual space.

At the same time though, there are examples in Bulgaria that reveal that teacher presence in the media might play a positive role. The educational crisis provoked by the pandemic in 2020 was also an opportunity for the Bulgarian school as it drew attention to the importance of the teacher profession. Teachers entered the news, they were invited for interviews, and they appeared on TV. Their public appearances circulated on social media as well. The Ministry of Education together with the Bulgarian National Television created a series of lessons, delivered by teachers from different Bulgarian schools that were broadcasted on TV during the period of distance learning. These lessons were also made accessible through the YouTube channel of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education as well. (Ministerstvo na obrazovanieto i naukata, n.d.) All these examples show that Bulgarian teachers became more visible and to this might be added the fact that they entered almost every home through the video-conference platforms. It can be said that the Bulgarian teachers during the time of the pandemic in some sense found themselves "in the spotlights" of the stage.

2.3 The Tech Teacher

The introduction of technologies in the classroom is an inevitable process, which is needed if we want a school that is adequate for the contemporary world. The role of technology in education is highly appreciated by Bulgarian teachers in general. In the Bulgarian context, the pandemic played a positive role as a catalyst in the process of technologization of the school. Most of the interviewed teachers share that digital technologies opened new educational opportunities. And many of them say that the pandemic gave them a chance (and forced them in some sense) to get acquainted with new technological tools in their teaching practices. They

realize that their classrooms underwent a great transformation concerning technology, which has to be recognized in the specific context of the Bulgarian school where the processes of technologization before the pandemic developed at a slow pace. On the other hand, many of the teacher respondents stress that the everyday work of the teacher becomes more and more complex and they often feel overloaded. A shared opinion among them is that mastering so many new and different skills is a challenge and this makes the teachers' vocation one of the most demanding ones.

In our digitally spectacular world teachers are challenged to compete for students' attention by finding ways to make their lessons "interesting". The world of digital technologies surrounds us and somehow redefines the notions of "interesting" and "boring". This pushes the teacher to find new, up-to-date ways to attract the students. Nowadays "the interesting" in the educational process is often associated with using new technologies. And it is not surprising that this is a message that is often used in the advertising strategies of educational sites.

Along with the technologization of the Bulgarian school, the period of the pandemic catalyzed also the proliferation and blooming of Bulgarian educational online platforms, which offered attractive educational materials for independent study at home. This process (which had begun even before the pandemic) affected the classroom as well – the teachers became a significant target group of the marketing of educational platforms.

Before the pandemic, the advertising rhetoric of Bulgarian educational sites and platforms had been mainly based on the assumption that the online lessons they offered were more interesting than the lessons in school because the first ones incorporated technology. The brick-and-mortar classroom was often represented as more or less "boring" as it remained mostly non-technological. But after the school moved on to the virtual terrain during the distance learning period, the situation changed. The teachers in the school institution became more tempted to create multimedia materials and to make their lessons more technologically attractive. And this trend has been kept after the school moved back to its normal and not entirely virtual organization. Still, the non-institutional educational platforms and sites continued to bloom during the period of distance learning as it became even easier to be used by teachers and students in virtual surroundings.

The basic assumption that students think of the "interesting" as "technological" turned out to be not so obvious in the interviews with the students. For the interviewed students an "interesting" lesson does not obligatorily happen in a class where technology is used. Respondents feel it is "interesting" when they are involved in different interactive activities that may not need any technology – for example, debates, games, role plays, contests, and projects. These insights pose an important question: What is the right way for the classroom to react to the increasingly technological world that tempts our senses with different audio-visual experiences? Should it try to compete with this by providing even more interesting audio-visual technological experiences or should it try to find ways to compensate by providing students with other experiences that require more face-to-face human relations and slowing down?

A valuable point of view on these questions is given by Sherry Turkle in her book "Reclaiming Conversation" (2015) where she suggests the notion of "attentional pluralism" which she defines as a "fluency in both deep and hyper attention". In her view, this should be one of the

main educational goals. In light of this understanding, we should read the following words: “If a moment of boredom happens in a classroom, rather than competing for student attention with ever more extravagant technological fireworks (Google jockeying!), we should encourage our students to stay with their moment of silence or distraction” (Turkle, 2015, p. 206).

The interviews with student respondents correspond to this understanding. When asked for example to describe an interesting lesson they experienced in school, students rarely connect this experience with the use of technology. They talk about it only when they are especially asked to reflect on the role of technology in evoking interest. Similar are the answers to the question of what makes a good teacher in the contemporary world. Students rarely point out technological competence. Almost all of the interviewed students mention the fact that many of their teachers need help with the use of technologies and that teachers don’t take advantage of them to the full, but they don’t think that this is what is the most important in teaching.

What appeared to be important though for all the respondents – teachers, students, and parents, was not the simple technical competence but a more complex overall literacy regarding technologies. Some research in the context of Bulgarian high school education reveals that this is also important regarding the development of student competencies (Danov, 2020; Vitanova, 2021). In two separate studies, Danail Danov and Natalia Vitanova pay attention to the fact that research shows that students master their technical skills, but they do not cultivate actual information and media literacy. The feeling of this is quite common for parent and teacher respondents. They share the view that teachers need not only to learn how to use technology in the classroom but also to acquire a better understanding of technologies and their impact on our lives and then convey it to their students.

2.4 The Human Teacher

With the development of technologies, the question of to what extent they should penetrate our lives becomes more and more significant. Is there a threat that in the future they will entirely replace human beings? Apart from fiction, the integration of artificial intelligence in education is a fact.

The interviewed students for this study were invited to reflect on the question of what if teachers were AI. Though some of them point out that artificial intelligence may be efficiently used for certain educational purposes, all of the respondents expressed a strong feeling that students need the teacher in the classroom to be first of all a human being. Some of them point out that for them emotions play a significant role in the process of education, as a twelfth grader said: “To be honest, I can’t imagine a robot... Besides ... emotion plays a big part in teaching and education as a whole... And it’s very difficult for me to imagine that there is no human teacher...” Another human trait that students seem to appreciate a lot is the teacher’s sense of humor. The interviews reveal that even when the teacher is rigorous if they have a sense of humor they are generally loved by students. And for many students, this is also a factor that plays a great role in delivering interesting lessons. An illustrative example of students’ appreciation of humor as important in the classroom is the following observation of a tenth grader, who tried to explain what kind of teacher he likes: “Teachers who tell us jokes while delivering the lesson... Because when you begin to get bored, they say something amusing...

and it becomes more interesting. School is not so boring..." The interviews show that a teacher's personality is a key factor in the way they are perceived by students. A twelfth-grade student, asked to describe a teacher whose classes he finds interesting and engaging, said: "Definitely, I have several examples (...) I don't think they [teachers] do anything special. But ... again I think that they have some charisma and this makes me listen to them." It's observable that in many of the interviews with students "charisma" is a keyword, usually used to name an important trait of the "good" teacher.

To summarize, it's visible that when asked what makes a good teacher in the world of digital technologies students stress the teacher's human characteristics that cannot be replaced by the machines, such as charisma, power of narrating, sense of humor, understanding, and empathy. All these are characteristics that students find important for the teacher's personality in general, not especially for the teacher in the Digital Age.

One more aspect that appeared to be significant during the interviews was the importance of face-to-face contact. Students, teachers, as well as parents shared an abundance of stories from the period of distance learning. Though a great part of them pointed out some positive aspects of this experience - mainly in terms of the easier organization of the day (not losing time for transportation to school, more freedom to make your own daily plan), the majority shared that they didn't feel well when the school went online. Most of the students shared that they missed the human relations with their teachers (and friends of course). They felt it more difficult to have spontaneous conversations with their teachers. They didn't feel engaged enough in lessons especially when there was no demand from the school to switch on their cameras.

All these examples reveal that integrating technologies in the classroom has its limits and outlines the significance of the question of to what extent should technology be introduced in the classroom. In her book "Reclaiming Conversation. The Power of Talk in the Digital Age" the media scholar Sherry Turkle reflects on how digital technologies transform the ways we communicate. She outlines the positive aspects of this change but raises awareness of the negative ones - that the use of technologies without having their limits in mind diminishes significant human capacities such as building deep relationships and creativity. An answer to this she sees in "reclaiming" face-to-face conversation. In this process it is crucial for us to understand our human vulnerabilities in the highly technological surrounding we live in: "We are faced with technologies to which we are extremely vulnerable and we don't always respect that fact. The path forward is to learn more about our vulnerabilities. Then, we can design technology and the environments in which we use them with these insights in mind." (Turkle, 2015, p. 203).

Acquiring a deep understanding of technologies as a phenomenon in today's world which significantly influences all human spheres, should be one of the main goals of school education as well. And here the teacher plays a crucial role.

3. Conclusion

There is a shared understanding that the development of the Digital World leads to great transformations in the educational sphere. The classroom is no longer the same as it used to be before the invention of the Internet. The new environment brings a lot of challenges for the teachers, by shaking their position as the traditional knowledge-keepers. As they are no longer the unquestionable authorities, they need to find ways to defend their own expertise and build trust in their students. In their position of “sages”, hidden behind the curtains, teachers are expected to wisely guide students in their orientation through the informational maze. Their mission as teachers becomes even more complex as they need to get oriented in the huge sea of voices of both experts and amateurs, described by Andrew Keen in his book “The Cult of the Amateur” (2007).

At the same time, the World Wide Web reveals new opportunities for teachers to gain public popularity. By the means of new media, teachers become more visible, and mastering their skills to use the new technologies allows them to actively engage in the highly audiovisual world and to seek ways to catch the attention of their students.

The Covid-19 pandemic served as a catalyst to many processes that were already going on in education and this is observable in the Bulgarian context as well. One of the aspects of this change is the proliferation of Bulgarian educational online platforms and sites that emerged before the pandemic but underwent considerable evolution during the period of distance learning. The observed platforms and sites emerged outside the school institution but actively seek ways to interact with the classroom, applying some pressure on teachers to change their teaching practices. The present research reveals that the period of distance learning turned out to be a good opportunity for these platforms and sites to gain popularity as not only students used them more but also teachers sought ways to integrate more digital educational tools and materials in their online teaching. All the teacher respondents in the conducted interviews see (though to a different extent) online teaching during the period of distance learning as a huge leap for Bulgarian education which lead to a more sustainable technological transformation of the school.

The need for teachers to acquire new technical skills and integrate new technologies in the classroom to adequately meet the expectations of the contemporary world is rarely questioned. But the conducted interviews reveal that more than that is needed. Teachers need not only to learn how to use technology in the classroom but also to acquire a better understanding of the impact of technology on our lives and to teach with this understanding their students to take advantage of the opportunities and avoid the dangers of the Digital World. As the pressure of digital technologies on human lives becomes more and more intense, teachers need to have more and more knowledge on how to teach with technology, but also it is crucial that they have the instruments to establish some limits and to protect an especially human learning space. The conducted interviews with students for this research reveal that the teacher in the digital world should be even more human than ever to keep the balance with technology. Teachers still need to be sages possessing special wisdom as they have to be guides and mentors, they have to build human relations and in some sense they have to be not only knowledge-keepers but also human-factor-guardians in a technological world.

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