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LEST WE FORGET: INHUMANITY THREATS IN TEACHING IN THE NEW ERA

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Abstract
Since the prolonged pandemic, teaching language will never be the same even in the New Normal when less strict social distancing measures apply. The sudden shift from offline and/or blended learning to full online learning has brought about diverse pedagogical implications. On the one hand, unlike in traditional teaching and learning, one positive outcome in online learning is the enhancement of social engagement, autonomy, and digital compassion. On the other hand, ignorance, over-indulgence, and cold-heartedness are among the drawbacks of technology-mediated teaching. Drawing from personal experiences and relevant studies, this article highlights the threats of inhumanity when the power of technology takes over life skills that language learners need to acquire. At the core of the recommendation made herein is an open heart in this nearly closed world – a small fraction of Pope Francis' newest encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship. The four core values suggested include critical thinking, ethical reasoning, interpersonal connectivity, and compassion.

Keywords: compassion, connectivity, critical thinking, ethical reasoning

Introduction

"I am teaching in an empty classroom, and it's kind of sad," said Kara Stoltenberg, from Norman High School in Norman, Oklahoma, USA (Reilly, 2020). The thirty-year-old language arts teacher spoke to *TIME* at the start of the school year done virtually across the country since August 2020. Stoltenberg was among teachers who took part in 2018 teachers' protest on account of wage stagnation and budget cuts that had forced teachers to take second or third jobs. The situation did not improve and even made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. She was among the concerned and caring teachers who hardly wanted their students grow disoriented by the abrupt change from offline to online teaching. Being quite new in online class, she admitted, one-to-one tutorial was not feasible, given the limited budget. Such is a story from a well-developed country.

In Indonesia, likewise, nearly seventy million students in Indonesia were subsequently out of school after COVID-19 cases had been reported in March 2020. The lingering pandemic has impacted education across the globe to date. Shifting to online learning is indeed hard and exhausting (Chiodini, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). But the expectation is that the closure of schools does not mean that the learning also

stops. As shown in a great deal of research (e.g. Allo, 2020; Bao, 2020; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Zhang, Wang, Yang, & Wang, 2020), efforts have been made in the field of language teaching along with various strategies, good practice, tips and tricks to survive in 2020, the year of teaching dangerously.

This article is to address the shortcomings of teaching in the New Era, should one important aspect is overlooked, i.e. humanity. It argues that the closure of school is the opening of the heart. It will discuss briefly the bright and dark sides of the situation, i.e. collaboration versus cold-heartedness. The second parts attempts to offer the core value to live-by when teaching in this difficult time, that is, opening of the heart in the bordered world. As closing, the article suggests that despite the hurdles in facing the New Era, educators shall triumph in victory.

Looking on the bright side and the flip side

The world is sick. Disease and death are part and parcel of the fallen world today. But life goes on. Changes are what we all have to do during the spread of Covid-19 and the post-coronavirus world. Thus, it is better to navigate both the positive and negative aspects of the rapid transition that inevitably occur in the way we teach today. To use two examples from the praxis known to the author, the first is a classroom practice in creative writing, the other is a report gained from students' reflections. Herawati has shown that poetry writing is quite therapeutic as to help students in her Creating Writing class cope with the abrupt change in learning mode and life as well. Poetry writing helps the students stimulate and reflect on feelings as diverse as fear, grief, isolation, and hope (Herawati, 2020). Plato says, "At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet." Here, based on Herawati's experience, we can say, "At the touch of a disaster, everyone becomes a better poet." Another study examines expressions gathered from EFL students' reflections on online course during the pandemic (Pasaribu, Truly Almendo; Dewi, 2021). The study uses Appraisal Theory to capture the linguistic evidence of various attitudinal resources when the students expressed feelings and opinions of the students through their reflective journals. Their reflections evoke not only appreciation for the lecturers' efforts but also for their own IT skill enhancement during the online learning. Here, autonomy, digital compassion, and learning engagement are among the bright side of learning in times of COVID-19.

While the two examples above are positive, doubt lingers still because online learning is not always easy for older teachers who do not grow up with technology. It is not hard to cite recent studies that discuss the struggle, strategy, and success of online teaching during this sudden transformation (Allo, 2020; Anugrahana, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Hung, 2016). The pandemic has indeed taught everyone to learn and re-learn. As shown earlier, millennial students are sympathetic to their teachers who are not tech-savvy and willing to assist their elders. David Geurin is a Bolivar High School in Bolivar, Missouri who loves to share his teaching experience via his blog. He is well-quoted by passionate educators on Twitter. To quote the of-quoted one, "Classrooms don't need tech geeks who can teach. We need teaching geeks who can use tech." (Guerin, 2015).

At this stage, one might ask what on the flip side is. Expansion of technology has considerable impacts on language and literature teaching. Technology gives a

lot of benefits and efficiencies. It is hard to deny that automation helps students, teachers, and administrators do things more easily. Teaching today is facilitated by a wide-range of technology and multimedia-based language learning. Throughout virtual, long-distance learning, technology is the Rockstar of education. But there is an afterthought here. Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and numerous smart devices should be used cautiously (N. Dewi, 2019). I would argue that education remains a complex and intertwining process. Education involves human relationships, emotion, empathy, and a variety of psychological as well as spiritual experiences – all irreplaceable by machines. This article would argue that there are other serious threats of more substantial nature in terms of human involvement. WHAT ARE THE THREATS? Some threats are as follows.

Inequality

COVID-19 has exposed inequality of various types both in developed and developing countries as shown in numerous recent studies. If food insecurity threatened the unemployed and marginalized groups in the UK (Power, Doherty, Pybus, & Pickett, 2020), what equality can we expect to befall in Sub-Saharan Africa with poor hygiene and clean water (Okoi & Bwawa, 2020)? Even in Singapore, inequality is obvious and the call for social distancing is deemed irrelevant, especially for migrant workers who have no choice but living in cheap, chock-full dormitories (Tan, 2020).

With regard to education, likewise, inequality is exposed: Rural households with no electricity and preparedness for digital learning vis-à-vis affluent society in major cities. While all students across the world are out of the classroom, so to speak, not all of them have access to digital technologies. Schools in rural areas are not sufficiently equipped with devices for online learning. One study shows that in a prosperous country like Denmark, for example, the pandemic heightens the inequality in learning opportunities whereby children from rich families have easy access to digital books than those coming from low-income families (Jæger & Blaabæk, 2020). If inequality is evident in Denmark, what the conditions are like in the underprivileged parts of the world? Poor students are thus practically deprived of learning activities far too long to make them eager to study.

Over-indulgence

If the first is caused by lacks of ICT, the second threat is over-indulgence, thanks to easy internet access. Now that students receive no regular, proper instruction, and guidance from their teachers, they are subjected to 'autopilot' learning and internet is often their substitute teachers. A survey involving 3,275 parents in China shows that as many as 84.6% had negative views about online learning. Many of them even rejected it because their children spent less than 30 minutes in each online class assigned to them. These parents preferred traditional face-to-face learning because young children usually had insufficient self-regulation and parents had no professional knowledge to cope with this situation (Dong, Cao, & Li, 2020). Similar problems are predictably evident across the world because neither parents nor children are ready to embrace online learning.

Cold-heartedness

Cold-heartedness is the third threat. What is cold-heartedness? In our modern-day context, act of kindness is hard to find. Most of the time, the pandemic makes us so wrapped up in our own lives that we forget about our brothers and sisters who are less fortunate. Pandemic-related angst, socio-economic problems, academic underperformance are real. These three are threats that loom large in teaching during this time of crisis, to say nothing of a lack of quality content and competencies for e-learning is quite new a system to apply abruptly.

Nonetheless, despite the hurdles in facing the New Era, educators shall triumph in victory because from threats, hope usually rises. It is to the pursuit of hope that the discussion now turns.

Finding hopes in solidarity and core values to live-by

On 3 October, 2020, Pope Francis released the new Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship. The papal document is "a diagnosis of social ills" – illness that is exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Pope, the poor, the disabled, racial minorities, women, refugees, and the unwelcomed in society are people who suffer most from injustices. In a nutshell, *Fratelli Tutti* is a recipe to heal the world by helping the strangers who suffer. Here are the five salient points: (1) Our culture is sick; (2) Learn from the parable of The Good Samaritan; (3) Goods are meant to be shared; (3) Adopt local flavour with universal worldview; and (5) Develop a culture of encounter (Dulle, n.d.).The Holy See would like the world to collaborate to end the pandemic because from threat hope may soon rise as long as people unite in solidarity.

No disease is worse than anything else in this wounded world than social ills, said the Pope. Interfaith dialogue, friendship, and collaboration with people from different backgrounds is now deemed necessary. The Gospel story of the good-hearted Samaritan who helps the stranger is one such example. In 2019, the Pope met Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi. That was a sign of hope arising from the brotherhood between the two religious leaders. They jointly signed a document that helped inspired the issuance of the *Fratelli Tutti*. The Holy Father also mentioned how the media in this all-digital world have contributed to this degenerative process of inhumanity. People often lose respect for others in digital communication: the easier it is to spy on others, the more communication technology increase hatred and destruction. News of COVID-19 with different categories and trustworthiness, for example, have bombarded people's lives every day. This digital culture often fails to build human communities. Instead, it fosters fears, individualism, xenophobia, and attacks on vulnerable groups of society.

Drawing from the spirit of solidarity, here are four core values that will hopefully make teaching in the New Era more manageable. The values to live-by include critical thinking, ethical reasoning, interpersonal connectivity, and compassion.

Critical thinking

Richard Paul and Linda Elder are among authorities in critical thinking theory. They define critical thinking as self-directed, self-disciplined, self-

monitored, and self-corrective thinking (Paul & Elder, 2006). Discussing the relationship between criticality and creativity, they suggest that both inseparable achievements should be taught concurrently in practical, everyday contexts because they often overlap and interact with as well as augment one another. How can we boost critical thinking?

The wealth of literature that discuss critical thinking never fail to mention Bloom's Revised Taxonomy in planning and designing lesson and activities for, in this case, EFL learners. The use of authentic, student-cantered, and culture-based materials is also crucial to boost critical thinking (Zhao, Pandian, & Mehar Singh, 2016). Other studies suggest integrated approach with reading and creative writing (Ferrer & Staley, 2016) and student-centred approach in cooperative learning. (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019).

A large corpus of research suggest literature-based EFL to enhance critical thinking (e.g. Dewi, 2018, 2019; Stefanova, Bobkina, & Sánchez-Verdejo Pérez, 2017). Stefanova et al. (2017) use literary texts to teach students to think critically. A close analysis of the study reveals that both students and their teacher perceive the model as highly effective, in particular, in terms of self-reflection. In addition, intrinsically motivating activities that are relevant to current issues are also important. Frequent opportunities to discuss drama, short stories, poems, etc. have proved to be highly beneficial for the students. Such activities give the students broader perspectives that help them interpret real-world problems properly, the study claims whilst showing the assessment grid results.

In short, authentic, student-cantered, and culture-based materials can increase students' critical thinking. It is not an exaggeration to say that to boost critical thinking, it is important that language learners spoil themselves with books. Reading book is fun and it is also a great way to learn and pile up stocks of vocabulary to help them think critically and creatively. The good news especially for literature teacher is that fictional stories are remarkably the best books to increase critical thinking. Books don't need batteries, says Nadine Gordimer. During lockdown, reading book is a healthy activity.

Ethical Reasoning

Ethical reasoning is simply understood as guidelines of the rights and the wrongs in human conduct. Integrity, for example, is doing the right thing, even if nobody is watching. COVID-19 is an emerging, rapidly evolving situation; each one of us is challenged to continue doing the rights in the wrong situation. One of the challenges is to be more caring to environment. Any human activities are responsible for either the preservation or depletion of the earth's resources.

Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society, and our relationship with nature. Pope Francis in *Laudato si'--Praise Be to You: On Care for Our Common Home* argues that taking care of the Divine creation is a moral obligation for people of all faiths. In this Encyclical Letter, the Head of the Catholic Church claims that people's care for plants, animals, and one another reflects human cooperation with God's plan (Francis, 2015). *Laudato si'* can thus be seen as a document on Ecohumanism, addressing as it does, global imbalance whereby the rich (multinational companies) continue to indulge their appetite to exploit nature at the expense of the poor who are the most grieved because they

are deprived of the bounties of nature. *Laudato si*' is therefore not only for Catholics but also for everyone who are affected by severe problems of climate change (N. Dewi, 2018; Novita Dewi, 2017b, 2017a). We should continually sustain connectivity as global citizens of this century. Environmental destruction is a shared problem to be collaboratively solved by the community of the world. This can be done, through education. Therefore, teaching language in the New Era should continue attending to this ecological problem.

Interpersonal connectivity

Even the technology that promises to unite us, Stephen Covey says, divides us. Each of us is now electronically connected to the globe, and yet we feel utterly alone, says Dan Brown in *Angels & Demon*. Two famous people here doubt that technology is perfect. Both are concerned about interpersonal connectivity that is often lost to technology. There are common hurdles of internal, external, and interpersonal kinds pertaining to the use of technology. Laziness, lack of discipline, procrastination come internally from within the students that technology cannot change. External factors include poor internet connection, cost of phone credits, being assigned with massive homework, and household daily chores.

The Indonesian government mitigated the abrupt change from offline to online learning by broadcasting an educational TV program called "Belajar dari Rumah" (Learning from Home) and "Guru Berbagi" (Teachers Sharing) through the national television network to help children learn from home. The program lasted a few months after the first COVID-19 outbreak. The Ministry subsequently provided social assistance in the form of phone credits and internet data packages. Students and teachers need support in conducting long-distance learning.

It would seem that internal and external obstacles are easier to manage than the interpersonal problems that may involve actors in school setting, home, or society. Students who have neither smartphone nor internet access feel lonely, rejected. Zero supervision makes them feel ignored. To cite only one study conducted in Beji Hamlet, Sawiji Village, Jogoroto District, Jombang Regency, East Java, online learning did not run as expected given the lack of infrastructure put in place and trained teachers (Hidayah, Al Adawiyah, & Mahanani, 2020).

Despite some online class success stories (e.g. Allo, 2020; Suni Astini, 2020), other interpersonal issues remain unsolved. For instance, those who hardly have problem with internet may sometimes find virtual class boring. Old teachers have to learn and unlearn how to make teaching enjoyable. Zoom meeting is fun in the beginning. But it is not as interesting after three months. The fact is that learners do not seem enthusiastic in sitting in front of the laptop all day and meeting friends only virtually. Disengagement leads to ignorance. In this eventuality, it is advisable that teachers build rapports with students more frequently. Additionally, giving feedback and fast responses are also useful to maintain interconnectivity.

Compassion

Pope Francis says, "If you do not feel compassion toward a person in need, if your heart is not moved, it means that something is wrong." In Indonesia, based on a survey conducted by the SMERU Research Institute, distance learning

intensifies inequality between teachers in major cities in Java and those in villages, especially outside Java. With no proper facilities to teach their students online, teachers in the outskirts have to visit their students' homes to give and collect homework given the lack of internet access and proper digital devices. Henricus Suroto, teacher of SD Kanisius Kenalan is such a teacher (Anya, 2020). Suroto conducted teaching face-to-face by visiting his students from house to house. To teach his students, he rode a motorcycle down a rocky road in the mountainous area of Menoreh, Borobudur, Magelang, Central Java. Here we see the compassionate teacher goes the extra mile to ensure that his students learn. Pope Francis will only bee too happy that Indonesia has many Surotos. Compassion is here to stay and will continue to stay.

Conclusion

In short, what kind of person we would like our students to become? The answer is clear: Someone who respects nature, diversities, and justice. Various challenges ahead are inevitable if the pandemic persists. Technology lends itself to over-indulgence, instance gratification, 'autopilot' learning, lack of discipline. When used incorrectly, technology is not supportive, although accuracy, productivity, and efficiency are on offer with technology. The abrupt change of everything due to the COVID-19 pandemic is too complex to solve by the online world. In education, especially, the opening of the heart in this closed world is vital. All in all, here are the words of the technology guru Bill Gates: "Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them, the teacher is the most important." Teacher is forever in the spotlight; and it is the more so in pandemic times.

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