Connected Learning during COVID-19: How to Connect and Keep Studying while Social Distancing

With more than 1.5 billion learners impacted by COVID-19 related school closures, there has been a push to explore online and digital resources to promote continuity via virtual learning, and a rush by higher education providers to push their courses online.

However, digitized resources alone do not constitute a programme of study and are rarely certified learning experiences; digital resources are most effective when aligned to a curriculum, locally contextualized, and properly accredited. These are principles the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLCC) has championed since its inception.

A further challenge to this new context is that even in the best of times, most refugee and host communities have limited access to hardware devices, and connectivity can be prohibitively expensive. Lack of access also limits acquisition/development of the digital literacy and skills required by teachers, students, and their communities to make the most of the available learning resources.

How can we adapt to these new situations?

The CLCC underscores the importance of learning as a social activity, and thus has generally promoted blended approaches. In crises such as the current COVID-19 epidemic, we appreciate that sharing physical space is not always a possibility. However, if resources are in place, the continuation of learning and the sharing of virtual space as an integral component of that learning may still be feasible. It is also important to consider adjustments and adaptations to business as usual that will enable sustained, quality learning experiences during this time. Below are some suggestions, divided by theme.

PEDAGOGY
1) **Building digital literacy among students and parents.** Digital skills are vital to actively contributing to today's world. These skills suddenly become a necessity when issues like COVID emerge and digital learning becomes a requirement. During COVID, digital literacy can be enhanced by enrollment in a number of the partner-curated tools available at the conclusion of this document.
2) **Assisting educators with Instructional Design**. Educators also need support in knowing how best to support digital learning. We've been working with governments to equip educators with skills for effective Connected Education, through initiatives like Instructional Design for E-Learning, or IDEL. In response to COVID, several of the webinars are being made available to the wider public.
3) **Increase virtual support**: The CLCC largely advocates for a blended approach, however since face-to-face learning is not an option, it is important to move your

facilitation and individual support mechanisms online or via text, and provide additional support where needed

4) **Record it!** As both students and teachers have interrupted schedules, the more that can be prepared and delivered asynchronously the easier on everyone's lives. But remember, focus starts to reduce after 5 minutes of watching a video, so keep it short, and/or engaging.

5) **Identify immediate faculty needs**, and triage them in order of importance. There may be people on your staff who are being asked to do things differently, and will need support.

LOGISTICS

6) [Identifying available resources](#)[1] **with open licensing, as well as tools for virtual learning.** We continue to work with partners to update the list of available digital resources and tools for students and teachers to use.

7) **Identifying the tools** that your students are already using, including low-tech options, and distributing content through these media. For example, in many contexts Whatsapp is ubiquitous and well suited for this function, and can be used to send audio/visual materials.

8) **Print needed materials** if there is no access to digital infrastructure and your number of students is relatively few. Of course the tradeoffs between environmental harm and continuation of learning must be weighed, but in some cases, some assignments can be done this way.

9) Ensure student data remain protected, this includes their mobile phone or other communication details. This can be a challenge when new tools and routines are implemented rapidly, but it is vital.

TECH

10) **Interim access to digital infrastructure.** Access to digital infrastructure - be it a phone, laptop, or connectivity - is a matter of equity when it comes to virtual learning. In order to ensure that all learners have access (not just those who can afford it), consider providing loaner devices and/or data vouchers so students can finish out the term. Whether laptops or tablets, consider also loaning devices to facilitators so they can more easily communicate with students on WhatsApp and other group message mechanisms.

11) **Power considerations:** It is important to consider that charging of students' devices will remain a consistent challenge. If solar lamps that enable USB charging are available, these should be lent/provided to students in addition to devices (along with the necessary charging cables). In the case that this is not feasible, charging stations should be opened up and an access schedule developed for students. These stations should be equipped with disinfectant materials to avoid potential spread of germs at these facilities.

12) **Boost WiFi signals.** In some locations, learning centers have local area networks or wifi hotspots that could be boosted to enable the surrounding homes to access the network, and therefore provide access to the internet or any local server. If access to the Internet

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[1]This list includes a broad range of resources continually updated from myriad outlets

is permitted, then provisional passwords can be shared that are time bound to allow many users a chance to access.

13) Utilize Bluetooth to send lessons and audio/visual files etc.
The radius range of Bluetooth capability is determined by the type of device and may make this approach difficult, as the average range for a mobile device is 10 metres. A brief analysis of whether commonly owned phones per context are considered bluetooth-enabled and to which specifications would be required to understand the efficacy of this solution. A file compressor to shrink files and ensure minimal data consumption would additionally be required.

14) **Add additional security** and/or malware software as students may be logging in from locations and devices they hadn't previously been using. This will protect any loaner devices that are put into circulation.

15) **Ensure the apps and tools you use are suitable** for the bandwidth students will be accessing. Since they are no longer using dedicated facilities, it may be possible to scale back the resource usage of your programme's essential tools.

PSYCHOSOCIAL

16) **Be aware** of the potential for delays and miscommunication, and adjust in a flexible manner. Again, new mediums of communication between students who are now more isolated than before will require everyone to be more flexible.

17) **Give learners additional time** to complete assignments. The goal is that they continue to learn deeply and make progress.

18) **Provide additional counseling** or psychosocial support services. For many students, their programme of study is one of the most important things in their lives, and gives them substantial hope. In crises such as a pandemic, the uncertainty and fear, compounded if movement and connectivity are restricted, can take a mental toll and interfere with academic progress, not to mention other parts of our lives.

In the context of COVID-19, it is important to recognize that we need to move past simply digitizing materials, and have meaningful discussions on how to leverage collective knowledge and good practices to create an effective response.

But we need your help.

Here are different ways that you can support quality connected learning to ensure in times of crises that everyone is able to benefit from connected and virtual learning opportunities:

1) **Advocate for digital resource providers to indicate the [licensing agreement](#) on any material available -** Licensing should always be part of the conversation from the start.

While emergency efforts to make proprietary digital materials available for limited periods is a start, making learning resources (or at least some of them) openly licensed indefinitely has exponentially greater impact. It will allow marginalized communities to have access to these much needed resources throughout their entire educational careers. Simply put, if learning resources are not clearly licensed, educators don't know whether, or how, they can use it.

2) **Ensure interoperability of learning resources** - Materials that are specifically designed for a particular platform or tool, and can't be used across platforms, have limited value in low-resource contexts, particularly in places where offline functionality is vital. As resources are being selected, do flag this as a consideration.

3) **Consider the hidden costs** - When selecting materials and tools for use in digital learning, consider the hidden fees and data privacy issues that might be placed on educators, students, and communities when selecting certain tools. Ensure these considerations are part of the conversation with content creators when creating materials and with educators and learners in the use of different learning materials.

4) **Reach out** - The CLCC stands ready to offer advice and support to the best of its ability; please contact us if you feel there is a way we, or an entity in our network, can help.

Partners' Curated Tools Pages:

● **IDEL - Connected Learning** Resource Page
● **John Hopkins -** Teaching during Campus Closures
● **Fordham University -** Course Continuity, Creating Multimedia, and Managing Discussions
● **Carey Institute for Global Good, Center for Learning in Practice** - Moving Learning Online
● **mED Alliance** - ICT4E Covid-19 Resource page
● **INEE - COVID-19 Distance Learning Collection**
● **EdTech Hub** - Open educational resources in response to Coronavirus
● **UNESCO -** Distance learning solutions to mitigate COVID-19 school closures
● **Google - Teach from Home;** Google enabling distance learning
● **Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies - ICT Inventory** https://ict.ineesite.org/
● **Amazing Education Resources**
● **Harvard University Graduate School of Education** - Lesson Plan Database
● **International Society for Technology in Education** - Learning Keeps Going Resources