

# **Distant yet personal: equality in distant education during Covid-19 lockdown in Italy**

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## **Abstract**

Since March 2020, Italy imposed a lockdown to the Northern-Central regions, leading to the massive use of distant learning approaches in middle and high school level. This change was sudden and unsupported by any forms of preparation for the teachers, who were required to shift attitude towards digital devices in their teaching from (cit.): “They cannot have their phones in class, into use whatever you can!” This article aims at investigating the main challenges experienced by middle and high school teachers in literature and languages related subjects, through eleven interviews. We conducted a thematic analysis and identified three main challenges related to: Efficiency of teaching, social contact, and technical challenges. The sum of these challenges undermines equality in the pupils’ participation during class activities. It also highlights existing issues related to social status and family role in education, pupils’ engagement, and proficiency. At the same time, we found that teachers experienced their role, as actors in creating a framework for equality in education in digital learning rooms, dividing teachers and pupils while connecting them on a more personal level.

## **Introduction – Problem domain**

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, recent lockdown policies have brought radical changes in education in different countries. Italy was among the most affected countries, with a rapid development in the contagion (Cereda et al. 2020; Di Giandomenico et al. 2020) and a sudden need to adapt to new social rules, including a sudden move to distant learning, to overcome the danger of the pandemic and keep the contagion under control. During the first lockdown, which took place in March 2020, the Italian school system was running with little integration of digital technologies in the classroom (Molina 2021, Moricca 2016), where teaching was conducted in a traditional face-to-face fashion, through exercise and homework (Novara 2018). Regarding digital tools, each school was already using a Content Management System for sharing of documents and communication, while teachers were using smart boards to show slides presentations or other material inside the classroom. Pupils nevertheless are expected to engage mostly with textbooks, pen and paper. Moreover, as the first lockdown in 2020 caught teachers unprepared (SIRD 2020, Moricca 2016), we expect them to have gathered substantial experience on how to deal with distant learning when a second lockdown caught them again, November 2020.

Starting from these insights, this study investigates how middle and high school literature and language teachers experienced their transition from face-to-face to distant learning during the Covid-19 emergency. We also aim at understanding how they perceive their role as teachers, in relation to the strategies they developed to manage their new challenges and to maintain a relationship with pupils during lockdown time.

The sample consisted of 10 female teachers between the ages of 39 and 63, two of whom are middle school teachers, and one male who is an on-leave teacher, responsible for digital pedagogical training<sup>11</sup> within the municipalities of Turin and Novara.

The aim of our study is to uncover how the teachers related to the sudden change from face-to-face to distant learning, and how they interpreted their role in these new circumstances.

### **A sociomaterial perspective on the Italian lockdown**

A main change during the two lockdowns was obviously the shift from a face-to-face to an online distant learning practice. In line with Drotner & Erstad (2014) in the Italian school system digital technologies were not acknowledged any educational value, but already during the first lockdown technologies turned from a marginal to a predominant role in Italian schools. Technologies are typically associated with entertainment and low cultural values (Drotner & Erstad 2014), however, during the lockdowns, technologies attracted increasing attention as means of interaction between teachers and pupils. Therefore, our analysis builds on the theory of sociomateriality (Orlikowski 2000), according to which material artefacts participate in human practice, on equal footing with the humans involved. As stated by Latour (1986), artefacts are active participants in human activities, so that it does not make sense to try to distinguish their role from that of the human participants. In Latour's terms we argue that during the lockdown, digital technologies became more distinctively "mediators of meaning" between teachers and students, which "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry (Latour 1986, 39), hence contributing to the meaning making process. In so doing, technologies act as "social objects" (Barley 1986), triggers of social dynamics, hence altering the participants' attitude and expectations, in relation to their historical and temporal context. Similarly, in our study, we argue that digital technologies acted as mediators during the Italian lockdowns. Technologies allowed pupils access to knowledge and interaction between teachers and pupils, thus affecting the participants' attitude and expectations towards each other. In this sense, we expect that the shift towards distant learning could have brought significant changes in the social dynamics between teachers and pupils, but also between teachers, challenging existing practices and eventually leading to organizational changes (Orlikowski 2000; Barley 1986).

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<sup>11</sup> By digital pedagogical training we refer to the so-called National Plan for the Digital School, from the Italian: Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale (PNSD). As a part of this project, 120 teachers were selected on the national territory. These teachers were put on leave for two years, in order to promote the PNSD and support schools both at a regional and a national level.

Even if requiring deep institutional changes (Marchetti & Petersen 2021; Drotner et al. 2017), digitization and distant learning practices have often been celebrated for encouraging pupils to become more independent, while acquiring digital competences that will be useful in their future professional life, and for pushing teachers to challenge their habits while becoming more effective communicators (Bates 2015). In fact, digitization processes are acknowledged for causing radical cultural changes in learning practice and values (Orlikowski 2000; Latour 1986), as reflected by changes in institutional language (Marchetti & Petersen 2021). Practices like blended learning and flipped classroom have become established in higher education, where blended learning is defined as a sensible integration of face-to-face and distant learning (Bates 2015). Flipped learning can be seen as a specific implementation of blended learning, in which pupils face new content on their own and are provided support from teachers in the classroom, when dealing with exercises (Bates 2015; Owtson 2013). However, Owtson argues that institutions did not “scale up” properly to gain full advantage from such practices (2013). According to Owtson, the integration of blended learning institutions should happen through a redefinition of academic goals, to increase students’ engagement and to provide a better learning experience to commuting students. Salmon et al. (2008) agree that the shift to virtual learning environment leads to the definition of new strategies, which can exploit the affordances offered by technologies. Salmon et al. (2008) propose the model of “e-tivities,” intended as a distant redefinition of class activities, encouraging asynchronous, flexible, and independent engagement of university students. The teachers in our sample used online resources as stimuli or proposed online activities for their pupils. However, e-tivities do not replace teachers, on the contrary these require teachers to act as moderators, segmenting each e-tivity in smaller tasks, providing students with a clear agenda and middle level achievements, and establishing netiquette rules. The lack of appropriate support to university students could lead to motivation loss, isolation, and ultimately dropout (Salmon et al. 2008); more severe consequences might emerge among younger pupils. Moreover, the distant learning experienced during lockdowns in many countries, does not correspond to the distant learning models discussed in literature, but it represents an extreme scenario of learning in isolation, in which young pupils deal exclusively with digitally mediated contact with teachers and classmates.

The Italian Ministry of Education promoted a series of measures to support education during lockdown in the areas of “(i) technological equipment for schools; (ii) staff training in ICT; (iii) support of students at risk of drop out” (Pellegrini & Maltinti 2020). However, the Italian school was not prepared for such a “radical change”, which affected over 8 million students and demanded commitment from teachers and families alike (ibid.). It took circa two months for teaching to be up and running. Teachers took initiative in distributing slides and video lectures by e-mail, through the school content management system, and selected learning platforms (ibid.; Giovannella et al. 2020). Recent studies claim that most teachers preferred synchronous activities, while less than 20% of teachers planned for asynchronous activities, because of lack of time or incentive. Assessment was run mainly through synchronous oral interviews (Giovannella et al. 2020), a typical practice in Italian education.

Schools and individual teachers were praised in current studies for having showed commitment, resilience, and resourcefulness in delivering teaching, despite the circumstances and the lack of training and systematic e-learning practices in the past (Pellegrini & Maltinti 2020; Apolloni et al. 2021). Interestingly these studies showed an inclusive user perspective (Drotner and Erstad 2014), taking into account how distant learning can affect both learners and teachers.

### **Methodology**

This article builds on qualitative data collected in two runs, during the first and the second lockdown in Italy. These data were collected through online interviews, mostly for practical reasons such as geographical distance and Covid-related restrictions. Online interviews are a methodological practice associated to netnography, which is defined as ethnography applied to the Internet, intended as another social context in which people engage with each other and their practices (Vestergaard 2017; Kozinets 2010). In this respect, the core principles of netnography are derived from ethnography, in terms of engaging with respondents and their practice online, either simply observing online exchanges between the respondents and their friends, or participating to their practice, commenting on existing posts and sharing new materials, just like when conducting observations face-to-face.

Our study focuses on the case of eleven teachers (Table 1). Ten of them are in the humanities (mostly literature and languages) in secondary education (middle and high school), with pupils spanning from 11 to 18 years of age. One of the respondents is instead a teacher on leave, working as a contact and trainer in the framework of the PNSD. These teachers are active in the municipalities of Turin and Vercelli in Piedmont, a region located in the North-West of Italy and one of the first to adopt distant learning.

During the first lockdown period, we conducted video interviews and observed four respondents, participating in their content sharing activity, as several of them were active in sharing content. One of them in particular is managing a popular blog on her teaching activity and has recently published a book.

During the second lockdown we focused on conducting online interviews, mainly because the respondents were not as active on social networks. We noticed that through time, these teachers have become more competent and used in conducting online distant learning. However, the situation with the new lockdown contributed to the emergence of stress and burnout, so that although more experienced, these teachers still consider their jobs under lockdown conditions harder than in normal conditions.

**Table 1. List of Respondents, their age, school and taught subject.**

1. F (Anna)	41-50 (44)	Middle school	Italian literature and language, art, pupils with special needs
2. F (Sara)	41-50 (43)	Middle school	Italian literature and language
3. F (Emma)	41-50 (44)	High school oriented to professions	Italian literature and language
4. F (Silvia)	41-50 (44)	Literary-linguistic High school oriented to university studies	Italian, Latin and French literature and language
5. F (Clara)	55-60 (58)	High School	French literature and language
6. F (Elisabetta)	41-50 (48)	Technical High School	History and Italian literature and language
7. F (Laura)	60-65 (63)	Technical High School	English literature and language
8. F (Erika)	35-40 (39)	Language High School	Spanish literature and language
9. F (Gisella)*	55-60 (59)	Scientific High School	History and Philosophy
10. F (Cinzia)*	55-60(56)	Scientific/Linguistic High School	Drawing and Art History
11. M (Andrea)	41-50(46)	EFT – Équipe Formativa Territoriale#PNSD Piemonte	Physics (on leave)

Our goal was to collect stories from the teachers and basically guide the discussion, therefore, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Bellamy & 6 2012). We started with a list of three questions on the challenges they met with distant learning and with their digital tools, and which strategies they have developed. Afterwards, we conducted a thematic analysis through a form of category zooming (Halkier 2011) of the video interviews. As our analysis aimed at creating an overview on how individual teachers were making sense of their new practice, and how they saw their role in making teaching work for them and their pupils. During our analysis we established three main categories and a few subcategories to refine our analysis (Table 2).

**Table 2. Analysis categories and subcategories in our analysis**

1. Efficiency of teaching	Daily Rhythm	Netiquette
2. Social Contact	Among pupils	Among teachers
3. Technical Challenges	Access to education	Learning rooms

Through our analysis, we applied a zoom in-zoom out dynamic on the data (Halkier 2011; Pamphilon 1999), as first we focused on details and then we tried to gain an overview of the teachers' perception of their new role. Our categories enabled us to zoom in the material, looking for details, hence we could zoom out to gain an overview of what the teachers were telling us. In this way we identified two main areas, in which the teachers perceived their role as critical, such as: Equality and Mentoring; more details about the analysis will be discussed.

In our study we are interested in teachers' perspectives on the shift to distance learning, therefore, we acknowledge that our account is partial, as we should also conduct interviews with the pupils of our respondent in order to fully understand the impact of the lockdown and the shift to distant learning. This could be conducted in a second phase of this study.

From an ethical perspective, we have respected the code prescribed in online studies (Grønning 2017), we have communicated the goal of our study to our respondents, through informed consent forms, and we have changed the names of our respondents in this article to protect their privacy.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

In our analysis, we found that teachers were mostly affected by the sudden change from face-to-face to online distant learning, which meant a shift in learning culture without proper preparation, as exemplified by a quote from Silvia: "We went from 'they cannot bring their phones to class!' to 'use whatever you can!'" rephrasing what she was told from her school principal during a general meeting. The teachers had to reinvent their way to interact with their pupils, adapting to the lack of physical contact, and to rethink how they would present their topics through digital platforms they had never used before.

Regarding *Efficiency of Teaching*, the first category in our analysis, all our respondents argued that pupils who are not thriving can hide more easily than in face-to-face education. Sara, teaching Italian to pupils 11 to 13 years of age, argued that distant learning is: "Aggravating already existing issues", so that "Those who were thriving continue to do well, while those struggling find it easier to hide behind the screen!" She added that this was especially the case of pupils from low income, immigrant families, who in some cases even lacked good digital hardware and their families were not able to support them. Moreover, the shift caused an increase in workload: "It was complicated at first. The work duplicated, tripled... quadrupled (...)" (Laura), or "You have to say the same thing twice as much as you would do and it will take double time (smirking)" (Emma). The new routine was found to challenge the daily rhythm of the school day: "Some mornings I just didn't feel like starting classes (...) because I couldn't find the motivation inside me, because it was...you had to motivate yourself every day" (Clara). The pupils were also struggling: "We had to make a strict timetable, ... we basically kept the same as we had before" (Anna). Requirements for Netiquette followed as according to Laura: "During Lockdown, the kids, you know how they are at that age (...). There was someone responsible trying to follow, etc. Others, however, took advantage of it. They pretended to be online, but in reality, they weren't there (...)". Anna also added: "To make sure that they are paying attention, we ask them to keep their camera on and their microphone muted."

The teachers experienced distant learning as a challenge, but also as positively as "reinvention": "I've learned a lot of things. I've invented material that I think I'll reuse" (Claudia). Erika said: "I basically invented it because we hadn't received any training' (...). 'It was a continuous reorganization (...)' but it allowed me to discover so much material". Some teachers took the challenge as an

opportunity for innovation: “In the end it is more a matter of altering your teaching style” (Anna). Technologies here acted as “social objects capable of triggering dynamics” (Barley 1986) with positive effects, however, these effects could only be discovered through a societal change, demanding for a new policy (Drotner et al 2017).

Moving towards the second category, *Social Contact*, the teachers involved in the present study emphasize how networking with colleagues became more important during the lockdown, to overcome emerging issues through virtuous dynamics (Izzo & Ciurnelli 2020): “With some colleagues (...) the relationship improved and intensified. We exchanged a lot of ideas and opinions” (Clara). Regarding Social Contact with the pupils, in some cases, the teachers were able to establish a closer and empathic relationship (Kember et al. 2010). As a result, some introverted students found a way to open up as it was reported by Erika: “The shy ones achieved better results than the students who are usually more open in class. On the contrary, the latter closed themselves.” This was confirmed by Elisabetta: “I think that a few more pupils opened up a bit more...on the contrary others distanced themselves. These are the ones who really need the presence of the teacher, who always has to draw their attention to what you are doing in class.” These statements confirm Salmon et al (2008), regarding the need for the teachers to be present online and facilitate learning also in distant learning practice. Moreover, contrary to Giovannella et al. (2021), teachers like Sara and Emma tried asynchronous activities, concluding that less committed pupils tended to ignore them, unless these were combined with synchronous discussions or oral interviews. Therefore, the teachers’ decision not to rely extensively on asynchronous activities was not only due to lack of time or training, as argued by Giovannella et al. (2021), but it matured over time, as the teachers noticed that struggling pupils were falling behind.

Regarding the third category, *Technical Challenges*, the teachers reported a series of issues, especially during the first lockdown. Most teachers complained about the huge amount of work implied to adapt or invent new material (Marshall et al. 2020), besides broadband connection and hardware problems. Schools had to deal with the lack of hardware and/or connection of some students, who according to Sara used mobile phones to connect (Giovannella et al. 2021). According to Sara and Emma, the hardware requirement caused more troubles to low-income families and families who have more than one child in schools. Even Elisabetta, one of the teachers, said that: “We took turns [to use the computer] at the beginning, then we decided to buy another one for our youngest daughter.” Erika also argued that: “The school borrowed computers, tablets with a contract for internet connection. So, good or bad, we were able to solve these problems.” The connection also proved challenging, as argued by Clara: “When I have ten pupils online, I can’t hold the connection. I live in a place where we’re not wired.” Moreover, as technologies became learning mediators, linking many personal rooms together, Emma joked in her blog about the need to “remove her drying rack from the background while teaching”, as her students notice everything and tease her. Laura reported that “[some pupils] were online in the kitchen, with their mothers passing under the webcam (...) doing chores,” which might be distracting. The need for physical learning rooms became a priority for many families of pupils and

teachers, for instance, Elisabetta stated that: “We had to do some internal ‘moving’ (...) move books, set up tables from the basement, so that everyone had a little bit of space.” Learning rooms suddenly became layered entities, defined by the spot in the house from which people were connecting and the hardware they were using. Hence the need emerged for purchasing extra computers for families and for schools to provide computers to families in need, as well as digital platforms to access the class.

In November 2020, middle and high schools were closed again in Turin and in Vercelli. Although the teachers were more prepared, this closure was experienced as harsher. One of the teachers, Gisella, works in a school, whose principal decide to close a week in advance: “Heidegger talks about this feeling of indeterminacy that gives anxiety. So, total anxiety. (...) in addition to anxiety, rage entered the world of education. Rage exists in a latent form, as a type of suffering, a social suffering as well. School is a place of suffering, but rage is some kind of taboo. Now you can say that we also feel the rage over the school closure.” Andrea, the contact trainer for the PNSD, confirmed this trend saying:

[Technology] is more of a source of stress than anything else, (...) but also because we are overworked (...) They [teachers] are always at the computer (...). If I ask them to do training at the computer, they will throw it out of the window!

In line with sociomateriality (Orlikowski 2000; Latour 1986), during the shift to distant learning, we found that digital platforms became predominant in learning practice in Italy, constituting a precondition for the teachers’ presence and for school activities to take place at all during the lockdown. The challenge of dealing with these platforms enabled teachers to reinvent themselves as communicators (Bates 2015), as Clara said: “I think this is a stimulus. And it’s a stimulus for me and a stimulus for the pupils.” Emma mentioned: “I learned to produce and edit video lectures (...) my pupils tease me (...) What’s in the new episode?”

As in Latour (1986), digital platforms lead teachers to reinvent and craft meaning, engaging in new creative practices to exploit the affordances of the available platforms. At the same time, these platforms became a matter of discussion between pupils and teachers, which they negotiated with each other verbally and non-verbally: participating or disappearing, succeeding or expressing issues, and even making fun of the circumstances.

Moreover, during the lockdown online platforms became gatekeepers, giving or denying access to knowledge, revealing the teachers’ commitment in finding alternatives when technology failed. This new challenge raised the teachers’ awareness, regarding their role in securing equal access to knowledge to all pupils, in spite of their personal circumstances, while dependance on technology emphasized status and proficiency differences across the pupils, as testified by Sara, Emma, and Erika.

Assessment was tough, especially for those activities that benefit from face-to-face classes or interaction. According to Silvia, assisting pupils with Latin translations online seemed pointless. Silvia argued that: “Online assessment made feedback drier (...), right or wrong. It is also hard when you do



not have a direct look at their notes.” Erika, a foreign language teacher, argued that “languages are strictly linked to the non-verbal.” Silvia and Laura expressed concern on how to support their pupils for their final evaluation. Silvia was taking a class to their final high school exam and said: “Basically we will not fail anyone. I have a girl who has difficulties in writing, we will try to focus on her strengths (...) we will do the same with the others.” Similarly, Laura said: “Since day one I told my pupils that the final assessment would be neither an oral nor a written exam in any case (...) but would be based on their behaviour and participation during online classes. (...) then when I decided to assign them some work to do (...) I preferred to evaluate these works rather than the knowledge of the actual subject.” These teachers perceived themselves as “mentors” of their pupils and focused their effort in making them succeed despite the chaos created by the lockdown. In order to do this, they had to abandon the usual academic assessment and focus on securing equality and support to the pupils, attempting to patch up for lack of proper support during the two lockdowns, in line with Salmon et al. (2008).

Interestingly, through distant learning, teachers and pupils connected while being distant, however, as they were each sitting at home, teachers and pupils entered each other’s personal rooms, reconfiguring their social relations (Orlikowski 2000). Teachers could have a view of their pupils’ home and see for themselves if the pupils had access to usable hardware or not, discovering something about their social status. At the same time, quite differently from when the teachers walked across the pupils’ desks and had a close look at their exercises, teachers had to create a specific room for personal contact with pupils, allowing some time after their online classes to make individual discussion even more personal. This new dynamic benefitted the shy pupils, who could talk to the teachers away from their classmates’ eyes but challenged the more extroverted ones and enabled other kids to hide their struggles from the teachers.

Interestingly, recent developments in Italian schools reflect traditional value controversies between education and media studies as opposite fields. The two lockdowns have contributed to the emergence of the two dominant discourses in media and education in the Italian schools, respectively dealing with the role of technologies in learning and in understanding how technologies are embedded in social practices, also in schools (Drotner & Erstad 2014), which were almost technology-free until 2020. The integration between education and technologies created new layered learning rooms, distant yet personal at the same time, in which digital platforms act as gate keepers to knowledge and social contact. These layered learning rooms are complex and fragile artefacts, composed of different elements, which need to be functioning and well-integrated. In such circumstances, Italian teachers experienced their role as mentors for their pupils, making more conscious efforts to promote equality in these new learning rooms. At the same time, the teachers engaged in closer collaboration, mentoring each other in reinventing their teaching practice.

## Conclusions

In this study we have explored how Italian teachers experienced the shift to distant learning during lockdown time. Through a series of video interviews and a thematic analysis, we found that teachers experienced lockdowns as a challenge, physically distancing them from their pupils, while at the same time providing opportunities to reinvent their way of teaching. They established new collaborations with colleagues to support each other in those challenging times. As teachers had to adapt both educational programme and assessment criteria in progress, it is difficult for them to evaluate the impact of such a change on the learning outcomes of pupils. The first lockdown was particularly hard to manage, as the teachers had to suddenly adapt to a different learning practice facing without preparation an increasing workload and technical issues. Nevertheless, the second lockdown was experienced as more negative, leading to burnout and even rage. It was not anticipated and affected a population of teachers and pupils on the edge of psychological fatigue. In conclusion, our study suggests that the teachers experienced their role as actors, who are able to secure equal access to education also at a distance. Through a close mentoring activity, they focused on their pupils' strengths and tried to overcome their individual challenges in social status, engagement, and character.

Although teachers prefer face-to-face learning, we find that digital platforms created new learning rooms, which are distant and personal at the same time, dividing yet gathering people while sitting in their personal homes. We define these learning rooms as layered fragile artefacts, consisting of their physical room, their hardware, software platform, which might fail technically and pedagogically, emphasizing existing issues and challenging the teachers' role in securing pupils' equality through mentoring. The Italian discourse on learning technologies has shifted from disruption to tools for learning, however, learning is still perceived mainly as face-to-face interaction between teachers and pupils. Our study, however, delivers a partial look on the Italian lockdowns, since a limited group of teachers was reached, and no pupils were interviewed. In future studies, we could explore further the notion of mentoring and equality, in relation to how the dialogue between teachers and pupils occurs in digital learning rooms.

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