Emergency Remote Teaching

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Online Learning   Pandemic Pedagogy   Emergency Remote Teaching   Emergency Remote Education

Education in Emergencies

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 13). In contrast to online learning, this term describes instruction that is entirely remote and is not as robust as intentionally planned and well-designed online learning solutions. While ERT relies solely on technology-mediated learning and can include online learning, it is not limited to online learning solutions. For example, it may involve the use of radio, print, television, telephone, mobile devices, and other mediating technologies that can be delivered remotely. ERT is also different from education in emergencies, which often involves longer-term solutions to address emergency or crisis situations such as displaced refugees, although at times the two may be difficult to distinguish. Hodges et al. (2021) emphasize three characteristics of ERT – temporal in nature, immediacy of an emergency, and the remote nature of instruction – all of which are essential in distinguishing ERT from other terms it may be conflated with, such as online learning or education in emergencies. The purpose of this chapter is to position ERT as a unique term requiring a clear definition of the construct in relation to other prior or emergent adjacent constructs such as education in emergencies and pandemic pedagogy.

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, educational systems at all levels around the world had to cope with immediate lockdowns to control the spread of the coronavirus. Some estimates list as many as 1.6 billion K-12 students from over 190 countries lost access to in-person school (World Bank Group, 2021). Higher education students were affected too; for example, 84% of U.S. students in higher education had at least some or all of their classes moved to online delivery as a result of COVID-19 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). To provide instructional continuity, many school systems and institutions of higher education shifted to online modalities. Many referred to this instruction as online learning; however, there were several reasons why this label of "online learning" was not accurate or even desirable. To provide an alternative label that would help distinguish what was actually taking place from well-established online learning, Hodges et al. (2020) proposed a specific term for the instruction delivered under these circumstances: *emergency remote teaching* (ERT). The authors drew a sharp contrast between online education, which

has existed and been studied for over twenty years prior to the pandemic, and ERT. The central argument is that online education is carefully planned instruction where the online modality has been purposefully selected with adequate time for planning, development, and delivery of a robust educational system. Online learning draws on existing theories, models, and standards to deliver learners a permanent alternative or complementary learning option to face-to-face instruction. Hodges et al. (2020) note that ERT is not simply "a bare-bones approach," rather it represents "a way of thinking about delivery modes, methods, and media, specifically as they map to rapidly changing needs and limitations in resources" (para. 14).

Some significant differences between online learning and ERT exist. First, online learning is specific to the modality of online systems and resources as the instructional delivery method. ERT may call upon a range of different modalities. During the pandemic, schools reported the use of print materials mailed to students, programming on local public television stations, telephones, mobile devices, and other means of connecting (Catalini, 2020; RFI, 2020). Second, standard online learning intended as a permanent full-time option takes months to develop in contrast to ERT, which is developed rapidly in response to quickly changing circumstances. Hodges et al. (2021) further elaborated on characteristics of ERT. First, they note that ERT occurs as a *temporary solution to undesirable circumstances*. The temporal nature of the shift greatly influences designs and decision making, as the intent is not to maintain the remote teaching beyond what the circumstance requires. This short-term nature means fewer resources – infrastructure, time, and so on – are invested, leading to a potentially lower quality solution. This lower degree of investment cascades into the decision-making process to influence all manner of decisions in ways that are different from permanent, full-time online learning options. As just one example, many schools dramatically cut supports for learners with ADHD or special education needs during emergency remote teaching (Becker et al., 2020; Rice, 2020), even though those supports can be and are delivered for learners with ADHD as part of permanent online learning options (Moore & Barbour, 2023; Rice, 2020; see also the Greater Commonwealth Virtual School at https://gcvs.org/special-education-technology/). The end product is a very different sort of design, akin to the differences between a tent and a house.

Second, Hodges et al. note the "immediacy of 'emergency'" as another important difference. Emergencies have an immediacy to them that standard long-term planning for permanent infrastructure does not. In an emergency, decision makers must make immediate decisions bounded by the immediate realities of what is available and what is not. Those realities may also change during some emergencies, as available infrastructure is impacted by the emergency itself. For example, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters can lead to additional cascading systems failures as power lines and data networks are disrupted. ERT is situated in a context of crisis management where conditions may shift quickly and radically and conditions become increasingly fragile or unstable, necessitating processes to both mitigate potential damage and facilitate recovery (American National Standards Institute, 2009). Some instability may even stem from social unrest or civil conflict. For example, in Afghanistan, when public schools became targets for bombing because of Taliban resistance to girls receiving schooling, schools shifted to the use of radio-based education as opposed to online or mobile learning because the infrastructure for radio was more reliable (INEE, 2011). This differs dramatically from online learning, which assumes a particular type of infrastructure and assumes that infrastructure will be stable and reliable.

Third, Hodges et al. note that "remote" is an important word choice, suggesting instruction that is "removed" from its typical mode. It implies that some sort of communications technology will be required to bridge physical distances between educators and learners. It also stems from understanding the immediacy and emergent nature of the circumstances: rather than limiting options or descriptions of actual solutions to online modality alone, it affords a range of solutions that will arise as educators and decision makers navigate shifting circumstances.

Other terms have been proposed to describe education during the pandemic. One specific example that has broader use is "pandemic pedagogy." The term appears to have emerged from a Facebook group (Pandemic Pedagogy, n.d.) started during the pandemic that served as a hub for educators, students, and others to share insights, practices, successes and challenges, and research on fully remote or online education. The differences between ERT and pandemic pedagogy are unclear. Pandemic pedagogy is often used solely in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Szarejko, 2022), which suggests this term is limited to a specific time and a particular type of emergency. Additionally, in many publications, pandemic pedagogy and ERT are used interchangeably (e.g. Barbour et al., 2020; Tzimiros, et al.,

2023), suggesting little daylight between the two terms. While ERT is still used primarily related to the same pandemic, it appears that is largely because it emerged from that context and researchers and practitioners are still processing their experiences during that specific event. However, ERT is appearing in other publications situated beyond the pandemic such as the unfolding war in Ukraine (Andrusiak et al., 2022).

Proposing the terminology, emergency remote teaching, and its definition to describe the phenomenon that became so prevalent in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an important distinction for policy makers, scholars, and practitioners. Unfortunately, the terminology has not yet been adopted on a societal scale, which has resulted in inaccurate conclusions being spread in the press and popular media. Statements like "The Results Are In for Remote Learning: It Didn't Work" (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020) have been common during the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, often declaring that "online learning" does not work. Such statements ignore not only the differences in the purpose, design, delivery, etc. of emergency remote teaching, and the decades of research and evaluation showing the efficacy of online learning. Such statements also ignore the myriad of other societal issues taking place during the pandemic. Many individuals, including teachers, professors, and students, and their families were dealing with job loss, food insecurity, deaths of friends and relatives, and the general stress of living through a situation not experienced for over 100 years (Moore et al., 2022). It is nearly impossible to determine what factors made the emergency remote teaching experience better or worse for some than others. The quick move to emergency remote teaching allowed for continuity of instruction where the alternative in many cases was no school at all.

Predating the COVID-19 pandemic, by many years, the term "education in emergencies" has been used to describe education occurring in a variety of circumstances. Sinclair (2007) defines education in emergencies as referring to "education for populations affected by unforeseen situations such as armed conflict or natural disasters" (p. 52). The work on education in emergencies has been conducted by groups like the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and international groups such as UNICEF and UNESCO. The construct of "education in emergencies" is not centered around modalities but instead on major disruptions to education systems caused by both civil (armed conflict, war, displacement of individuals, etc.) and natural causes (earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, etc.). Working together for over twenty years, these entities have developed a robust suite of research and resources that focus on topics from refugee education to life skills for peace education to case studies on the use of different educational technologies (see INEE.org for more). A central feature of education in emergencies is a rights orientation: education is a human right, and provision of education in emergencies provides a sense of normalcy, supports healing, restores hope, provides life skills that may mitigate future conflict, protects nations' investments in education, and protects marginalized groups. This orientation provides a sharp contrast to goals of instructional continuity often reflected in ERT and pandemic pedagogy. ERT may more rightfully be situated under the umbrella of education in emergencies, especially as a way to move scholarship and practice in this space past the confines of the COVID-19 pandemic. For more on education in emergencies, see the Burde et al. (2017) review of theory and research and Pigozzi (1999) working paper series published by the United Nations Children's Fund.

Where next for Emergency Remote Teaching?

Clearly, this is a term that has resonated with the research community, as evidenced by the number of citations of the Hodges et al. (2020) article in particular. Given the open questions around its relationship to "education in emergencies" in particular, this is a clear need to clarify the differences and the relationship(s) further. Additionally, future work should focus on articulating a theoretical framework for ERT that can support further research and the development of implementation frameworks to allow for a more smooth transition to ERT when it is needed in the future

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