Chapter 13
Finding a Silver Lining in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case of a Teachers' Online Community in Georgia

Tatia Johnson
University of Cambridge, UK

Maka Eradze
University of Foggia, Italy

M. Nutsa Kobakhidze
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented shift towards educational technology around the world. Teachers began exploring digital tools, which contributed to their professional development. This ethnographic research studied a teacher online Facebook community in Georgia from a participant-observer perspective to understand its social interactions and discussions, using both qualitative insights collected through observation, and quantitative data using various digital tools. The chapter attempts to find a silver lining in the middle of the pandemic: it argues that the adaptation to educational technology during the pandemic gave teachers new opportunities to explore teaching online. Peer-led teaching and learning, sharing experiences, and best practices appeared to be productive. This chapter contributes to understanding the Georgian context during the early waves of the pandemic, and can serve as a unit of comparison with similar online communities elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) identified a new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, which soon caused the global COVID-19 pandemic. By August 2021, it had infected over 216 million

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people worldwide, resulting in nearly 4.5 million deaths (WHO, 2021; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). At the time of writing this paper, we are still witnessing the shock and disruption caused by the pandemic.

Social distancing measures were introduced in different countries and jurisdictions, followed by national lockdowns in many places. Schools, universities and other educational organisations were forced to close worldwide. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), more than 1.59 billion learners around the world could not attend schools and universities and 194 countries shut down their educational institutions due to COVID-19 during the peak on 3 April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020a). This situation created a need and set the context for *Emergency Remote Teaching* (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020), using different types of high or low-tech solutions.

The necessitated unprecedented uptake of educational technologies has implications on different levels of education in the immediate, medium, and long term, including on teachers' professional development. On the one hand, in light of the clear urgency for the reorganisation of teaching and learning processes, synchronous ERT became the leading paradigm in response to the sudden transformational need (Eradze et al, 2021). On the other, many teachers had to start experimenting with educational technologies while having little to no experience. Different countries and institutions dealt with the sudden changes in their own way (Albó et al., 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Georgia became one of the first countries in Europe to close down its schools on 2 March 2020. Unaware of how long the pandemic would last, some schools switched to online teaching instantly, while others awaited further instructions. Guidelines, normative basis, and recommendations from the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) followed later. Among other guidance, they recommended schools to use the Microsoft (MS) Teams platform and provided log-in credentials to all teachers and students (Agenda.ge, 2020). On the one hand, although they were only recommendations, some schools took this very seriously and requested their teachers to only use Teams. Perhaps, this made it easy for teachers who followed the rule, but some complained via social media that they were not given the freedom to use digital tools of their choice. On the other hand, this specific recommendation was explained by the need to ease the reorganization and the management of technical assistance.

Qualitative research conducted by the Young Teachers' Union (2020) revealed that some teachers only used Facebook Messenger for online lessons. Their respondents reported that Teams was a complicated software and they had a hard time learning how to use it, even with IT support available. Some teachers could not even access their accounts at all. The respondents also named internet connection problems as a reason for not using the platform. According to statistics provided by the Education Management Information System (EMIS), between 15 March and 15 June, around 126 522 school students (from a total of 528 486) and 4 404 teachers (from a total of 52 060) never logged into their MS accounts (Publika, 2020).

A local alternative platform Feedc Edu was created weeks after the school closure. It was a free service, aimed to ease online communication between teachers and students, even with slow internet connections. (MES, 2020b). However, the platform did not gain momentum, and one year later, the website became inaccessible.

Teleskola[1], a joint project by the MES and the Georgian Public Broadcaster, continues to deliver TV lessons countrywide since its start in March 2020. Every day various lessons are broadcasted for students from grades 1 to 12, special lessons for those students preparing for the university entrance exams, as well as lessons for Armenian or Azerbaijani Ethnic minorities. The project supports minimising inequalities created by a lack of internet access, especially in rural Georgia. According to the annual report by the MES (2020a), 80.5% of respondents agreed that Teleskola contributed to the fact that the 2020 spring

semester was not totally disrupted. Georgia was among many other countries and jurisdictions which introduced low-tech solutions as an immediate response to COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020b).

By February 2021, school closures in Georgia amounted to 29 weeks in total (Ratiani & Araviashvili, 2021). In May 2021, students in 63 schools, as well as 188 individual classes in other schools, received distance education due to the spread of COVID-19 amongst their students and teachers (MES, 2021).

As the need for reorganization of the education process was immediate, at least initially, at the macro level, the system collapsed. Previously educational technology (EdTech) use and adoption were coming from micro or macro level initiatives. Now the pandemic as an extraneous force set the ground for policy indications. In this situation, in many countries, including Georgia, peer learning groups were set up on social media to handle the crisis and reorganise the processes of teaching and learning.

To understand these practices, the authors undertook an exploratory observation approach in a Facebook group of around 5,600 members. The group was set up immediately after the schools closed in response to the pandemic, and was composed of different educational stakeholders. The chapter provides an overview of the members of the group, demographics, as well as their roles (i.e., teacher, lecturer, parent.) and their reasons for joining, key topics that emerged, and analyses some examples of the most discussed posts. To analyse the group dynamics, the authors looked at word frequencies, the most discussed digital tools, and other relevant topics. The paper tries to find the silver lining in the middle of the pandemic: the opportunities, possibilities for growth and change in education. The unexpected, quick adaptation to the online environment during the pandemic may have given teachers new opportunities to explore and learn about different ways to approach their teaching.

BACKGROUND

In the last 100 years, Georgia has witnessed Soviet education (1921-1991), post-Soviet educational transformations (1991-2001), and an educational reforms period (2001-present) (Kobakhidze, 2018). Soviet education was centrally coordinated from Moscow (Glonti & Chitashvili, 2006) and aimed to bring up a "new Soviet man", following Marxist-Leninist ideology (Khodorovich, 1987). The first years of independence after 1991 witnessed an economic downturn that negatively influenced the budget for education, leading to just 1% of the gross domestic product in 1994. Still, progress included a localised post-Soviet Georgian education system (1990), implementing standards in education (1993), a draft law on general education (1996), and printing of new textbooks. International donors and humanitarian organizations such as the World Bank, Open Society Foundation, and UNICEF, funded various educational programs from kindergartens to universities (Chkuaseli et al., 2014).

After 2001, new educational facilities and organizations replaced old ones, requiring new types of qualifications, enrolment rules, examinations, etc. Georgia was becoming a Western-oriented country and started implementing international standards in education.

Despite all the reforms and the focus on improving the Georgian education system, school students have been performing below the international average in large-scale international assessments such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Georgian students scored lower in the domains of reading, maths, and science in 2018 compared to the same assessment in 2015 (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). The majority of the Georgian teachers have Master's degrees and report high job satisfaction, but their profession

is not very highly regarded (Tatto et al., 2012; Kobakhidze, 2013). Parents are also very satisfied with the schools, but students, on the other hand, score lower than average in international assessments and in general, have low levels of satisfaction (Mullis et al., 2008; Mullis et al., 2012; Mullis et al., 2016; Mullis et al., 2017; OECD 2018).

Since 2004, the MES has started distributing computers to schools. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (2021), by the 2009-2010 school year, 93.5% of schools already had 29 084 computers. The governmental foundation "Deer Leap" under MES was established in 2005 to support the computerization of schools, and coordinate extensive trainings for over a decade. The National Center for Teacher Professional Development (TPDC) started training teachers in information communication technologies in 2009 (TPDC, 2017). Despite such trainings and infrastructural investments, most teachers declare that they still have problems with digital competencies as in the previous international (Mullis et al., 2020), as well as pandemic emergency studies (National Assessment and Examinations Center, 2020).

A lot has changed in the Georgian education system in the last 30 years, but nobody was prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic, which undoubtedly had devastating effects on every aspect of life in Georgia and the world. The authors attempt to explore whether the drastic changes due to the pandemic have benefited schools in some aspects. Teachers may have been missing community of practice, peer learning, to support the use of their knowledge in real practice, instead of being a passive participant of a training provided by the government, which are often initiated top-down and not adjusted to individual needs and applications. Teachers' involvement in a community beyond their school, working on tackling newly risen global issues in education, together with other teachers and stakeholders throughout the country, solving their problems and helping others, could benefit not only their own learning but also help them find new approaches to their teaching beyond the pandemic. Government officials and other stakeholders, on the other hand, could observe real issues, problems, and interests. They could initiate programs on that basis, and also create more opportunities for peer learning and community of practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Computer-Mediated Communication and Social Media

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is communication between humans with the use of computers (Herring, 1996). Today, the term is used mostly for online communication, although it doesn't exclude other ways. There are many advantages of CMC such as supporting more frequent and explicit communication of emotions (Derks et al., 2008), quality conversation (Pettigrew, 2009), and increased satisfaction (Perry & Werner-Wilson, 2011). CMC also makes it easier to "people-watch" online, without being physically present at various places. But this comes with consequences. Often, the user's profile with whom we engage is anonymous. We do not see real social interaction, but only screen-filtered messages that can be edited later. Many subtleties are lost online and it becomes more difficult to provide a thick description of social interactions. Archer and Akert (1977) conducted an experiment that proved that a lack of nonverbal cues made understanding the meaning and context very hard and produced "radically different levels of interpretation accuracy" (p. 443).

Social media is defined as "forms of electronic communication […] through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Social media users have come up with alternative ways to express nonverbal

cues, such as exclamation marks to communicate excitement or frustration, using all capital letters to communicate shouting (Harris & Paradice, 2007) and there are icons, representing facial expressions, called emojis. Sumner et al. (2020) call the new "reactions" of Facebook, a social media platform, the Paralinguistic Digital Affordances. But, just like in face-to-face conversations, it's not always straightforward and understandable what we see or read and what the communicator means.

Facebook has a lot to offer to everyone in education. The Education Foundation (2013) calls it a "Swiss Army Knife of tools to unlock learning for young people within and beyond the classroom" (p. 2). Facebook is the most commonly used social media tool in Georgia. According to Statista (2021), more than 3 million users from Georgia are registered on Facebook as of January 2021. In this research, the authors looked at how different parties in the field of education interact and work together using a Facebook group as a space and as a tool.

Professional Networks and Peer Learning

More and more people turn to each other in social media to exchange information, teach and learn, give and receive advice on their complex, real-world problems. But how does one find other like-minded people or the ones involved in the same field? This is where social media groups become useful. Today, one can find a group about almost anything, those about buying and selling items locally, to a group where its 1.8 million members pretend to be ants in an ant colony[2]. Anybody can create a group and invite people. Some social media groups have become a place for professional communities, such as teachers' groups, or groups on EdTech, etc.

Being a member of such communities can contribute to professional development in different ways than attending a training, or exchanging a conversation with a colleague. People learn from observing each other (Bandura, 1971). According to Bandura's theory, social context is as important in learning, as is cognition. Online professional communities offer exactly the social context, where members can learn and imitate others' ideas, knowledge, and actions.

Parker (1977) studied 60 networks aimed for school improvement and recognised 5 key common characteristics. They were "a strong sense of commitment to an idea, a sense of shared purpose, a mixture of information sharing and psychological support, a facilitator who ensured voluntary participation and equal treatment, and an egalitarian ethos" (Lieberman, 2000, p.222).

Traditional professional development strategies, where teachers are passive recipients of the information are not effective. Top-down initiatives, giving teachers no chance for complex, real-world, and relatable education are destined to fail. Little (1993) studied how "the dominant training-and-coaching model—focused on expanding an individual repertoire of well-defined classroom practice" (p. 129) does not answer recent teaching goals and challenges. On the opposite side, the bottom-up approach, such as the community of practice and peer learning has proven to be beneficial for professional and organisational development (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018)

Today, in the digital world, creating and being a member of professional networks is easier than ever. According to connectivism, "a learning theory for the digital age", individual learning is closely tied to the network, institution or organisation they are involved in (Siemens, 2004). Research has shown that the community is a meaningful part of teachers' professional development. Community members mostly seek ideas and examples to solve their personal, immediate problems in their teaching practice (Duncan-Howell, 2010). Tour (2017) observed teachers who self-initiated professional learning through their learning networks where they used various digital tools for their professional development.

Unlimited resources are already available for consumption without having to get out of the comfort of our homes. And the internet has become more or less accessible to the whole world, making it easier for people to communicate. Peer learning, sometimes referred to as peer-assisted learning, is long studied as an effective way of education for students and professional adults as well. Research by Jackson and Bruegmann (2009) concluded that students experience larger achievement gains if their teachers engage in peer learning. In the research published by Menezes and Premnath (2016), peer-lead teaching is evaluated as "[at] an appropriate level of difficulty and delivered in a less threatening environment than other methods of teaching" (p. 160).

The COVID-19 pandemic put online communities in the spotlight. Many groups were initiated to address the issues and their impact on education. Recent research has shown that such online professional networks have benefitted the educational practitioners in different countries (i.e., Beardsley et al., 2021; Eradze et al., 2021; Luik & Lepp, 2020). But just creating Facebook groups and inviting teachers is not enough. Nelimarkka et al. (2021), in their recent study, concluded that online groups could "serve as learning networks" but they require extensive facilitation.

METHODOLOGY

The online environment makes it easily accessible for researchers to conduct an ethnographic study: There is no longer a need to physically go to a location to observe study participants. Besides, it has never been easier for individuals to connect virtually, despite their distant locations, through different online platforms. Netnography is a term specifically referring to online ethnographic research. While originally introduced to observe consumers online (Kozinets, 1998), nethnography has become interesting for researchers in various areas, including learning and education (Bartl et al., 2016). It is commonly used to observe online communities as social phenomena. Rather than focusing on isolated context, text, and pictures, nethnography looks at the online environment of a community as "an online equivalent of a village or a neighborhood" (Kozinets, 2011, para. 2).

The authors of this paper observed the online community from the beginning not only as the Facebook group's administrators but also as regular participants. Just like most of the community's members, they are teachers and parents themselves, sharing their concerns and engaging in discussions. Therefore, participant observation was a rational choice of method for this research. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected for a comprehensive picture.

Participation Divide and Other Limitations

Observing people online can be more accessible, but it comes with its limitations. Body language and facial expressions are not visible, oculesic, haptic, and proxemic feedback is absent, the tone of the voice is not heard. According to Mehabian (1981), 55% of communication happens through body language. Others argue about the percentage, but in general, agree that body language plays a big role in communication. Thus, although observers are familiar with the social media environment and often guess the attitude of the communicator, they cannot be as confident as they would be in the case of real-life communication.

Around 63% of Georgians use Facebook (World Population Review, 2020), however, we cannot be sure that the teachers in the Facebook groups observed for this study are representative of the overall national teacher population. Many teachers still have problems with the internet connection or do not

own a device and/or lack experience and technical skills to use social media. Blank and Lutz (2017) concluded that none of the social media platforms is representative of the general population and that "social media data cannot be used to generalise to any population other than themselves" (p. 741).

Except for the lack of access or technical skills, other layers also create the participation divide. Women, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to contribute less to online conversations (Hargittai and Jennrich, 2016). On the other hand, Facebook is used by more women than men. This results in an unequal representation of online content. The level of education also plays a role in producing content (Schradie, 2011).

With digital interactions, different biases come into play, such as algorithm bias. For example, the Facebook news feed is different for everybody. Each user sees the posts that, according to the Facebook algorithm, are important and interesting for them. Taking this into consideration, it's possible that involvement also is defined by the algorithm. Taking all the above limitations into consideration, the results of this study should be taken cautiously and cannot be generalised to the whole teacher population in Georgia.

The Facebook Community

ERT (Hodges et al., 2020) changed the most common practices in education. Lessons in physical classrooms were not an option anymore. Somehow, teaching and learning had to happen from home, under lockdown. Using digital technology in teaching and learning was not optional anymore, it became a necessity and the main communication medium. Educational practitioners had to start experimenting using digital technology and learn new skills, otherwise, lessons simply couldn't be conducted. Teachers had to reach out to learn and develop their practices. That is where Facebook groups can play an important role, as a space to share. On 10 March, a new group, *Online Education in Georgia,* was created on Facebook. The group was founded by two Georgian researchers of education, who later became co-authors of this chapter. It aimed to provide a space for conversation around the topic, to share teaching practices and knowledge about different teaching platforms, to encourage and support group members in a difficult time for the education system.

Teachers, school principals and other administrative staff, lecturers, students, parents, policymakers, employees of the Ministry of Education, researchers, EdTech companies, non-governmental organizations, journalists, and other stakeholders joined the group. Members started exchanging concerns, opinions and discussed the next steps in the Georgian education system during the pandemic which covered all levels of education, including early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The group grew very quickly and attracted lots of public attention.

This paper offers qualitative insights collected through participant observation as well as quantitative data which was available to the group administrators. The chapter explores the general characteristics of the observed Facebook group, its composition, discussed topics, and, at the same time, possible peer learning patterns in the group.

DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected in the timeframe of 10 March 2020, the first day of the creation of the Facebook group, which happened eight days after schools were closed in Georgia, up until 30 June 2020. The results show the reactions, conversations, and data of the first 3.5 months of the very first lockdown in

the country. This was a time of shock, uncertainties, and confusion. The pandemic has not yet ended; therefore, this paper presents the findings of its beginning.

By the end of June 2020, more than 5600 members had joined the group. According to the data provided by Facebook, the majority of members (88.7%) were women, between the age of 25 and 44. Most of them, around 3900 users, were located in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. The rest were distributed throughout the country. Around 120 members were located outside of Georgia. As a result of a questionnaire when joining the group (501 users responded) and a poll posted later in June (196 users took part), it can be generalised that around 77% of the group members were teachers, 15% - parents. In this case, the teachers' category includes school teachers, university lecturers, and trainers.

The following qualitative data were also collected: reasons for joining the group, contents of the posts and comments, reactions to the posts. The content from the Facebook group was anonymised at the data collection stage and no names or other identifying information were stored for further analysis. Given the anonymisation and the fact that this Facebook group is about education and not about rather sensitive topics, the data analysis has not and will not cause any harm to the participants; the findings may even contribute to identifying good practices and ideas for education.

For the content analysis, Sociograph[3] was used to export the list of posts from the Facebook group. 1102 rows were exported from the total number of 1211 posts. The following exported data were analysed: type of the post (status, video, link...), number of reactions („like", "love", "ha-ha"), number of comments, date (of when the posts were published), and the post content itself. The posts were later sorted under the following categories, listed in alphabetical order:

- **Article/blog/opinion** - excludes content where the main topic is about the introduction of tools/ instruments, educational resources, and news websites
- **Research** - surveys, questionnaires, and similar posts for research purposes
- **Local news**
- **Courses/webinars/trainings**
- **Emotional** - posts of members sharing about their feelings or the troubles they encounter in their teaching or learning
- **Psychology** - posts related to psychological aspects of teaching and learning
- **Group** administration and organizational posts
- **Practices** - posts by teachers sharing their practices and teaching experience, as well as links to other best practice resources
- **Questions about practices**
- Teaching **resources**
- **Questions about resources**
- Introduction and discussion of digital **tools**
- **Questions about tools**
- **Various**

Posts that were not related to education-related issues during the pandemic are moderated and deleted by group administrators. The above categories were developed using the inductive approach because there is not enough existing knowledge about the examined phenomenon and the aim is to learn more (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). Just like in the study by Chinn and Kramer (1999), individual posts were observed to be then combined into a larger narrative.

In total, 840 posts were categorised, the remaining posts were exported either as a blank row or did not have indications to allow for categorization (e.g., only emojis). The process of assigning categories to the posts may be subjective, but this is not necessarily a limitation. Rather, the advantage of participant observation is that the observer is part of the community and experiences everything together with its members. Participant observation allows authors to intuitively understand the meaning of data (Guest et al., 2013).

Except for the post categories, the authors used the word count analysis tool by Textfixer[4] to identify the most frequently used words. All exported posts and 1971 comments (out of the total number of 7185 comments) were analysed. Additionally, the results include the 10 most commonly discussed digital tools.

FINDINGS

Reasons for Joining the Group

Mostly, members joined the group because they wanted to simply get information about the topic and news around online education in and outside of Georgia. Responses to the sign-up questionnaire included: "to learn more about teaching online", "learn about distance education". Teachers typically answered that they wanted to learn more and to use the new skills in their classrooms: "help my students", "learn more about the resources to be able to effectively conduct online teaching", "to involve my students with disabilities in the online learning process", "I'm ready for the challenge".

Some wanted to not only receive but also share information and try to support others: "I aim to learn about the methods of distance teaching, use them for my practice and support colleagues", "give and receive new information", "share my knowledge", "offer distance consultations to my colleagues", "help teachers use Zoom".

What exactly the teachers want to learn varies: "create interesting tasks", " how to prepare for teaching, how to create new resources", "which methods and platforms are used for teaching online", "how to use Teams", "find some interesting tests".

Parents' responses were as follows: "so that my child gets education", "my child is starting school this year, I want to learn more about the teaching process, style and methods", "find interesting resources for my child", " I'm ready to support the school so that they transfer their teaching online, but the school isn't showing initiative which worries me", "because children are bored", "so that my child is not behind the curriculum".

Journalists were interested in finding content to share with their audiences: "find news and share them", "I am interested because of my profession". A psychologist joined the group to "[...] offer distance consultations for interested group members". Various responses included: "Our organization plans to support the Georgian government in this field, I am interested in the possibilities", "Using the Georgian experience to design an online teaching system for Australian schools", "I want to know what is happening, what is planned and then I will decide on my role", "I want to get in touch with interesting people in this group", and "I don't want it, they are forcing me". The author of the last response appeared to be a student, according to the Facebook profile.

Overall Group Activity

Within the first month of its creation, 4854 members joined the group. Over the next months, the number of new members, as well as the overall activity decreased, but the group nevertheless stayed active. Table 1 below represents the group activity per observed month. March was the most active time with almost 3000 daily active members on average. The number of daily active members is calculated based on how many users have seen at least one post in the group on any given day.

Table 1. Overall group activity

Month	# of new members	# of posts	# of comments	# of reactions	Average # of daily active members
March (10-31)	4854	580	4989	20112	2979
April	557	327	1456	5808	2104
May	156	191	473	2524	1598
June	41	113	267	1600	1359

On average, each post received 6 comments and 25 reactions. But over time the ratio of comments and reactions to posts decreased. Moreover, the last day of school in Georgia was on 20 May 2020, therefore, after that, the group became less relevant for the teachers and the overall activity has naturally dropped.

Post Types and Categories

Various types of content can be published on Facebook by its users. The most common types include statuses, links, photos, videos, and events. A status is simply a text, without including a picture or anything else. Links are content from other websites that are shared on Facebook. An event can be created for a webinar, an online or face-to-face discussion, a conference, etc., where the announcement about the event, its times, and a description is published. Out of 1114 posts from 10 March to 31 June that Sociograph was able to export, there were 356 links, 112 photos, 493 statuses, 150 videos, and 3 events.

Table 2 presents the number of posts in each post category, and the qualitative illustration as evidence. The most common posts, 148 of them, were questions about practices, resources, or tools. Out of those, 105 were questions about digital tools. This was followed by the introduction or discussion about various digital tools.

The rest of the exported posts didn't contain enough information to be categorised. For example, some items in the post list were video-type posts with no description and no link.

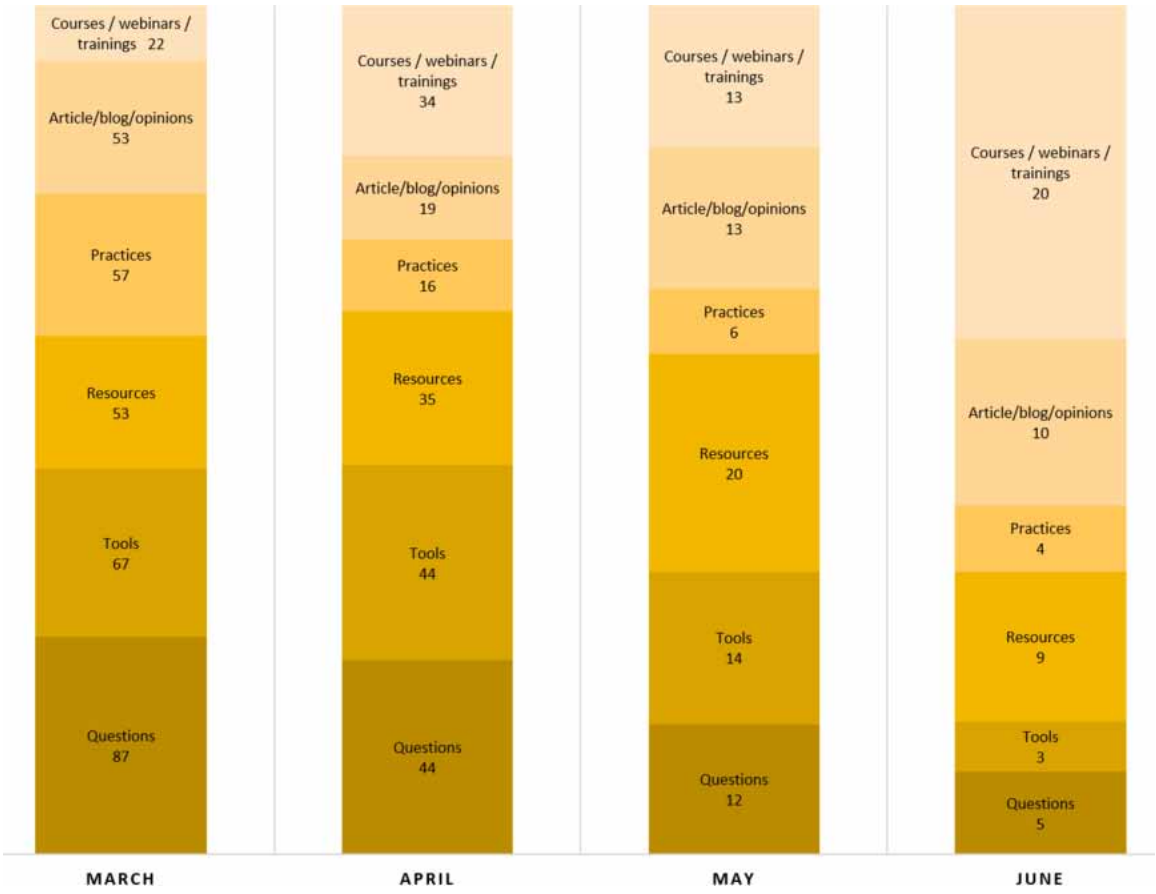
To gain a deeper understanding, the authors looked at how the six largest categories were distributed over the months. As discussed previously, over time the group activity slowed down and the number of new posts decreased. The reasons behind it can be that the school year ended in May and people, at least temporarily, shifted their focus away from education. Also, the initial shock had passed over time and online education had become more of a norm. Another possible explanation is that educational practitioners turned their attention towards centralised guidelines, recommendations, and programs, which had gradually started rolling out.

Table 2. Post categories and examples

# of posts	Category	Qualitative illustration / evidence
148	Questions about practices, resources, or tools	Can Facebook Messenger handle a video call with 12 students at a time?
The majority of questions, 105 of them, were specifically about the digital tools		
128	Digital tools	[website link] Detailed answers to many questions about using Teams for distance teaching. We also discuss the additional aspects of using technology for teaching.
117	Teaching resources	I am sharing my lesson with you: "The structure of the earth". The lesson is for 9th graders. [...] Because we cannot conduct lab practices right now, I decided to include the lab/observation in the lesson, which the students can do at their homes.
95	Article/blog/opinion	[...] 1. Distance teaching is not only about using Teams, Zoom, Skype, Google Classroom, or similar platforms. [...] It is about using many platforms, technologies, including electronic libraries, TV lessons, and everything available to us. 2. What is your aim? Give knowledge to the students, explain new material, strengthen what was already learned, evaluate. You can use any technology possible to fulfil these from a distance. [...] 7. Let's not aim for perfection. [...]
89	Courses/webinars/trainings	I have been in this field for several years and each of my scientific research and training has been about digital technologies. I am now offering [...] to share my experience. Free of charge, of course.
83	Sharing practices	I conducted an online lecture today with 100 students attending. [...] There were some awkward moments: 1. It would be good to have an assistant in the room, who can turn the light on or open the windows… 2. It's hard to manage a big group. 3. It's hard to read the questions in the chatbox while talking and delivering a lecture. 4. It's hard to talk in an empty room…
58	Various	I'm looking for a blogger who writes about education. Do you have any recommendations?
45	Group administration	There is a lot of useful information in this precious group but sometimes I cannot find what I'm looking for. For example, a video was posted yesterday about how to set up an online lesson. Maybe we can gather such resources separately.
40	Emotional	#thankteachers You may know that 4-8 May is teacher appreciation week. [...] If you like the idea, you can thank them too. [...]
15	Research	Dear friends, could you please send me links to reliable studies on distance education? I need case studies from different countries[...]
11	Local news	[website link] So that everyone has the information on what the Ministry of Education is doing and so we don't overlay the activities.
11	Psychology	[website link] This webpage is for school psychologists. There is a list of advice on how to help students while the schools are closed due to the coronavirus.

Figure 1 below shows a 100% stacked column chart displaying the number of posts in the particular month. Posts declined in every category except for one: "courses/webinars/trainings" didn't show a continual decrease. In fact, it became the largest one in June.

Figure 1. Change in post category frequencies over a period of 4 months



Discussions in the Group

Even though the largest number of posts were questions or discussions about digital tools, the longest conversations happened around different topics. The most commented post (with 135 comments) was a group organizational post, calling for volunteers to create working groups:

Dear friends, not to overlap our work, I believe we need to organise more in this group. Maybe specific people can organise special initiatives and we can create smaller working groups. One person can be a part of more than one working group. For now, these topics are relevant: Group #1: a manual for parents, teachers, and students (netiquette, cyber-security [...]. Group #2: internet accessibility (and preparing petitions) [...]. Group #3: organizing teacher volunteers to create teaching resources. Group #4: Issues regarding technology. Group #5: Psychological issues […]. Group #6: Trainings, webinars, and video instructions. Group #7: Pedagogical and methodological consultations. Group #8: Civic education [...]. Group members, please comment on who can contribute and in which group.

Originally, the post included 5 group suggestions but was later edited, as the group members proposed more ideas. Under the post, the group members started signing up to volunteer and started discussions

about their groups. As a result, 8 groups were created with 94 members in all of them. Some people were counted more than once since they were members of more than one group. Some groups started functioning and discussing for a while, others did not even commence discussions, and - very soon - all of the groups became inactive. One of the reasons behind this could be that the main Facebook group administrators were not managing these sub-groups and no active members emerged to take a lead. Or it could be that people did not have time and energy to contribute to larger causes, while their personal life and family were under the threat of the virus.

The second most commented post (130 comments) was a suggestion for the Ministry of Education to create TV lessons:

What do you think about the idea that the Ministry creates centralised lessons in each school subject for each class and broadcasts them on public TV? The resources can also be uploaded on the Ministry's website. This can help with the accessibility problem because not every student and teacher have internet/computer and technical skills. Mainland China (but not Hong Kong) did something similar. Those schools (probably mostly private), which can manage synchronous or asynchronous online teaching, should have the possibility to do so.

The discussion under this post was long and very informative. Most of the group members who commented liked the idea and wrote additional inputs on how it can be organised: create a special TV channel, send handouts to the teachers, have technical support available for the teachers, etc. Many agreed that, although it wouldn't solve the problem of accessibility altogether, it would be helpful to some extent. Some completely opposed the idea on various grounds: a centralised approach would go against bottom-up initiatives, the program that would be broadcasted, would not match each classroom's needs, teachers would not like the idea of their students listening to another teacher, or that teachers wouldn't be able to integrate the TV lessons into their teaching. Although the Ministry didn't respond to this post, Teleskola did appear on a public TV channel soon afterwards.

The third most discussed post (111 comments) was from a member, urging the other group members to not advise teachers to use any other tools except for Teams, which was recommended by the government.

If a public school asks you how to develop their online teaching, please only advise them to use Teams. It will be even better if you forward them to the administration or resource centre. [...] Not Messenger, not WhatsApp or its cousin Viber [...]. If necessary, it's also possible to use Edmodo [...].

The post had an authoritative tone, as if the author was involved with the recommendations from the Ministry, at least emotionally. The post caused different reactions. Some users did not support the idea that the schools should not have a choice to use the tool they want, and that such limitations would only hinder development and innovation. Some teachers asked technical questions, such as how to integrate Zoom in Teams. This post was written in March, but in May, the same member published a link from a personal blog, stating that schools should use Google Meets, with a long list of arguments why this digital tool was the most suitable for schools. The Ministry's recommendation for schools to use Teams had not changed.

The post with the most reactions (316 reactions) was a welcome greeting to group members who had joined the group:

Welcome and thank you for expressing your interest in this group! In this group, we will share practical advice and resources in Georgian and in English, which can help better understand online teaching, and in general, specifics of teaching in electronic format. You can also ask questions and get answers [...].

And the next most reacted post was a picture of Harvard's virtual classroom HBX live: a lecturer standing in a room with a semi-circular video wall, displaying many students. The post says: "This is how they teach at Harvard". Although the virtual classroom is not new and Harvard created it several years ago, the picture was very impressive and relevant at the time. There were comments from users wishing to teach at Harvard, and others wishing to challenge themselves: "I'll deliver a better lecture on Monday with Zoom". There was a discussion that even if such technology became available, many students wouldn't be able to participate in live discussions because of a lack of access to the internet, poor living conditions, etc.

Teachers consulting each other was one of the most frequent activities in the group. For example, one member asked a technical question: "I have 12 students in a group, and can Facebook Messenger handle 12 children?". The post received 43 comments from other teachers. Except for the answer that Facebook Messenger could handle a video chat with a maximum of 8 participants, there were suggestions to use other tools, such as Zoom, Teams, Viber, Google Meet. This was followed by discussions on the strengths and limitations of each proposed tool and how to deliver a lesson avoiding problems because of the limitations (e.g., divide the class into two groups, use several consecutive 40 minutes free Zoom sessions, etc.). Comments also mentioned how Facebook was not safe for children.

Such discussions gave the impression that the group members cared about helping each other and took their time to share their knowledge and experience. Facebook is built to encourage its members to share in this way. A study by Morris et. al (2010) looked at why people asked and answered questions on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. According to their results, "the responses gathered via a social network appear to be very valuable". People choose to ask their networks on social media platforms rather than searching on the web, "I trust my friends more than I trust strangers", "people that I know are reputable.", "[a] search engine can provide data but not an opinion" (p. 1745).

Mostly, the group members cared for the common good and contributed constructively, but there were also negative experiences. A couple of discussions gave the impression that the members tried to prove their superiority over others, or just simply talk down to them. An unpleasant incident also happened: group members worked for several weeks to create a common database of digital tools with links, descriptions, tutorials, etc. A shared Google Sheets file was created, where everybody could add to the list of the digital tools and offer support if needed. Unfortunately, one day, somebody tried to delete the content in the file. Luckily, the document was restored and the group decided to make it read-only for the public, reserving editing rights to admins. On the positive side, one of the members volunteered and created a mobile app where people could browse through the database in a nicer environment than a simple spreadsheet.

Word Frequencies

Analysing the most frequently used words in the group posts didn't display anything unusual or surprising. *School* was the most often used word (excluding common general words such as *and, or,* etc. that have no value here), followed by *if* and *teach*. Below is the list of the 20 most frequently used words in the group, translated into English. The numbers in the brackets indicate the frequency.

School (736)	Children (298)
If (650)	Education (261)
Teach (633)	Distance (241)
Teacher (591)	Video (234)
Pupils (535)	Problem (222)
Online (526)	Thanks (203)
How (516)	Good (177)
Possible (427)	Public (157)
Group (424)	Experience (151)
Lessons (357)	Private (150)

One can feel the uncertainty by looking at the frequent words, which was also the authors' observation as a dominant emotion in the group. As if the words even characterise main discussions in the group: ***If school teachers*** have to ***teach*** the ***pupils online***, ***how*** can they make it ***possible***? Everyone in the group was trying to figure out what was going on and how to handle the situation. There were also quite a few discussions about ***public*** and ***private*** schools. Some members were focusing on their unique situations, inequalities, and differences in how they can handle online teaching.

Zoom was the digital tool that was mentioned most frequently, followed by Teams. MS Teams was officially recommended for schools to use, while Zoom was usually the choice for universities and adult professionals. Below is a list of the 10 most discussed digital tools.

Zoom (170)	Google Meet (20)
Teams (162)	Skype (18)
Facebook (133)	Messenger (15)
Google Classroom (40)	Moodle (13)
Google Forms (32)	Khan Academy (13)

CONCLUSION

The group „Online Education in Georgia" was created at the right time when the confusion about the future of education was on everyone's mind and people needed a space to gather and talk about it. There have been much larger teachers' groups on Facebook before, but this group was unique because it was created because of the pandemic, and it gathered not only the teachers but also other stakeholders in education, such as parents, students, policymakers, researchers, etc. Although it is important to note that the group is still predominantly a teachers' group - more than 77% of its members are teachers. All of the above and possibly other reasons contributed to why the group grew so quickly and why some very good discussions about the topic of distance education, or more precisely, ERT during the pandemic, originated there.

Out of the 5,600 members by the end of July 2020, 88.7% of the group members were women and 77% were teachers. The distribution is not surprising. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (2018), in the 2017-2018 school year, 86% of teachers in Georgian public schools were women and only 14% - men.

In the first month after the creation of the group, the biggest number of posts were questions, mostly concerning the usage of digital tools in the classrooms. But the longest conversations happened around larger issues, such as different initiatives to support online education by creating teaching resources and guidelines, minimizing the divide. The idea of Teleskola was initiated and discussed thoroughly before it appeared on the public broadcaster. Group members even organised the fundraising to purchase a computer for a student in a rural, mountainous village of Georgia who struggled with internet access and the absence of the device. Several webinars were also organised by the group administrators on topics such as teaching during the pandemic, and sharing experiences of being a parent during a lockdown. A database of digital tools was created within the group, which later resulted in a mobile app.

The number of questions about digital tools halved in April and became one of the least frequent post categories by June. Teachers probably became more comfortable with the tools, or more structure was established in schools. The second-biggest category in March was the introduction and discussion of digital tools, which became the smallest category in June. It all makes sense because in the beginning there were lots more unanswered questions and a need for the new tools, and later, during the summer holiday, other issues became more dominant.

Announcement of courses, webinars, and trainings made up the majority of posts in June, while in March they were insignificant compared to the rest. This is also logical, with more time, it became clearer what was needed and new courses were developed, webinars, and other discussions were held to hear from experts or to share experiences.

The most popular posts were related to group organizational aspects; posts about general discussions of the state of education and suggestions to the MES; emotional posts such as worries about how the students with no means to access technology or the internet, would be able to participate in online lessons; discussions about different digital tools to use in online teaching; discussions on differences in public and private education during the pandemic; sharing international good practices and personal experiences, etc.

Questions were the most frequent posts in the Facebook group. Out of 840 categorised posts, 147 were questions. That's almost 18%, the largest category of posts. Most of the questions, 128 of them, received answers, and – more often than not – longer discussions took place under each post. The large majority of questions were by teachers from schools and higher education institutions, asking about which digital tools to use, or about specific tool-related questions. Some teachers asked for resources for their lessons, where to find them, how to create them, etc. And some asked their colleagues about their experiences and practice: How did others deal with specific circumstances? Should they obtain consent from students to record a lesson? How long should lessons be for elementary school students?

Such a large number of questions and discussions under such posts indicate that teachers did teach and learn from each other in this Facebook group in various ways. They asked for help and provided support to each other, they actively participated in discussions about digital tools, sharing their experiences, and best practices. Even though the group was not created solely for peer learning, the conversations seemed to confirm findings by Menezes and Premnath (2016), that peer-lead teaching was effective, because the environment was informal, not threatening, and everybody was on the same level, the pandemic had affected everyone.

The dynamics of the group confirms Lieberman's (2000) study results, that teachers did join the group because something big was happening (the pandemic and school closures), that needed everyone's attention and joint forces. But, meanwhile, they asked questions relating to their troubles in their teaching practice. This may also explain why some larger initiatives in the group, such as creating working groups to tackle issues such as drafting a manual for teachers, parents, and students on tips to navigate the digital environment, or petitions to make the internet accessible to all school students and teachers, took place but slowly faded away. Teachers simply had more pressing, immediate, and practical issues that they needed to pay attention to.

Another key characteristic is that the group was created by people who were deeply involved in the subject matter. Parker (1977) pointed out the importance of a facilitator, who is dedicated to the community and the cause. All of the above and possibly other reasons contributed to why the group grew so quickly and why some very good discussions about the topic of distance education, or more precisely, ERT, during the pandemic originated there.

Further research can extend this study to a larger scale, for example, gathering similar data from other social media groups with more members, thus making the findings more universally applicable.

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