

The Coronavirus and Education in China

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Editor's note: In the third part in their continuing series, Alice Wang and Ed Rowland examine the coronavirus' impact on China's educational system and the 100 million Chinese students from pre-school through university now exclusively attending online classes. They examine how all the stakeholders – teachers, students, teaching Apps (DingTalk, the government-chosen teaching App provided by Alibaba) have adjusted. Part one is available [here](#). Part two is available [here](#).

Chinese Lunar New Year is huge for all, Ms. Zhang included, of course.

But this year it got complicated. The Zhangs enjoy the holiday as their 8-year-old son is home from school but this year he was home longer. You might wonder what 8-year-child will do stuck at home. Well, he does nothing and causes you to do nothing too.

Initially the Chinese government extended all student holidays from 1 and then 2 weeks due to the Coronavirus outbreak. Then, it was announced that online classes would begin on February 6. Ms. Zhang's extended holiday hell ended; she was saved, not by God, but by online classes.

On February 6 China's Ministry of Education (MOE) announced postponement of the 2020 spring semester for schools at all levels and suggested online education to avoid a large-scale Coronavirus outbreak. According to Chinese government statistics, there are more than **100 million** students from primary school to college. This governmental policy launched the largest-ever remote classroom experiment in history. It challenged students, teachers, and the viability of educational and communications apps.

As one teacher put it, "I have never thought of being a livestream show hostess. It is very challenging in all aspects."

A review of learnings from teachers on the frontlines reveals:

Extra slide work is required. Preparing Presentation slides with beautiful pictures and even animation is a must, which is extra work from blackboard-writing.

Personal appearance. You must look more attractive to minimize students looking at other distractions. This changes a daily routine: get up earlier to carefully prepare dress and makeup. One teacher quipped, “I look in the mirror and wonder who is this appealing hostess, and where is the mistress?”

More things to do. After class, teachers are recalibrating their efforts incorporating daily feedback. Teachers are challenged by a whole new set of student tricks.

Learning new technology is not easy, especially for more senior teachers. It’s not always clear how to turn on the microphone especially when there’s no guidance.

It has not been easy for students either. The Chinese government has selected DingTalk as the official teaching APP. Ding provides a platform for communication, but it garners low ratings for many other features. As one person put it, “Ding is a great APP deserving 5– stars remarks, well, I will give it one star for 5 times.” The surprising comments from students fall into several categories:

Too many distractions. Whispering like “Hey, Ms. Wang did not change her clothes today”, is possible and not traceable. Those who are concentrating on the lesson sometimes can’t.

Panicky feeling/Put on the spot. DingTalk enables the teacher to specifically call on a particular student and turn on that students’ mobile phone camera as he or she answers. No hand raising and no sly hints from a nearby desk mates are possible. It’s not “normal” supervision and everyone needs to concentrate every minute.

But there are undeniable benefits:

Improved Efficiency leveraging AI. AI can automatically provide data bank questions and immediately determine/report the accuracy of student answers. This data analysis would contribute to education efficiency.

Individualized education. AI and cloud computing enable the overall education process optimization on a student by student basis from preview, class, exam and feedback loops.

In this huge remote education campaign, the Apps producers are the most challenged:

- **Continuous Improvement.** DingTalk has been continuously improving all filters and functions on the fly. Fixes are provided daily.
- **Reputational Hit.** DingTalk is suffering poor comments and low ratings (1 out of 5 stars) remarks in App stores. There has been a negative reputation hit. It remains to be seen if this is permanent.

Meanwhile Ms. Zhang is relieved by her son's full scheduled timetable from 8:00 to 17:00. Poor boy, overwhelmed by classes even on holiday, no chance to argue with mom about the Gamepads! Ms. Zhang can barely hide her pleasure.

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