

HOW TO TEACH ECONOMIC SUBJECTS DURING THE PANDEMIC? A SHORT OVERVIEW

Nora Codruța CURTA

***Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the efforts made in Romania to adapt the real school to the requirements of the online school. The digital transformation of the Romanian school required efforts both from the Romanian government and from the actors directly involved in the educational process - students, teachers, parents, the local community. The transition from the traditional classroom to the virtual classroom required the reconfiguration of the teaching, learning and assessment process, a process that depended on the digital skills of teachers and students. In order to use the open educational resources in the lessons, the didactic design was rethought and reorganized. At the same time, the paper presents the author's experience in using open educational resources in teaching economic subjects in high school, but also the issues related to their development and their contribution to changing the teaching process.*

***Keywords:** SMART-Edu, digital skills, digital education, educational platforms, open educational resources, online school*

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, has accelerated the process of digitizing education, which began earlier. Thus, the didactic activity moved from the real space of the school to the virtual space, the school becoming “online school” and the education “digital”. This transformation was captured by the European Commission in the first Action Plan for digital education, developed for the period 2018-2020. The document then provided for three areas of action¹:

- Better use of digital technologies in the educational process.
- Development of digital skills and competences.

¹ Source: “Planul de acțiune pentru educația digitală (2021-2027)”, available at <https://education.ec.europa.eu/ro/planul-de-actiune-pentru-educatia-digitala-2021-2027>, accessed 17.03.2022

- Improving education through better data analysis and forward-looking vision.

The Second Action Plan for Digital Education has been developed for the period 2021-2027 and includes two priorities:

- Encourage the development of a high-performance digital education ecosystem.
- Development of digital skills and competences relevant to digital transformation.

In order to move to online and hybrid learning, a high-performance digital infrastructure is not enough. We also need quality educational content, accessible tools and secure educational platforms to have an education and training system ready for the digital age. Romania has made and continues to strive to comply with this trend, despite the difficulties in various areas of economic and social life, in order to integrate fully into the future "European Educational Area", which is supposed to be achieved until 2025.

II. A brief analysis of the online school in Romania

We conducted this analysis based on the data contained in the document entitled "Strategy on the digitization of education in Romania 2021-2027 - SMART-Edu", which was submitted for public consultation between December 18, 2020 - February 15, 2021. The document talks about a "Modern School, Accessible, based on Digital Resources and Technologies", i.e. SMART-Edu and radiographs the efforts made for the digitization of the Romanian school in the period before and during the pandemic, proposing several directions of action².

We structured the analysis on two levels: at the country level and at the level of the education field. At country level, the first issue is the European Competence Framework (DigComp). The European document was drafted in 2013 and updated in 2016, but has not been translated into Romanian, it is not promoted in any way and it is not applied uniformly or sufficiently in Romania's internal documents. With regard to the digital skills of the population, the situation is as follows:

- According to Eurostat data, in 2019, 43% of Romanian citizens aged between 16-74 years had reduced digital skills, and Romania ranked first in the European Union, followed by Bulgaria.

² Source: "Strategia privind digitalizarea educației din România 2021-2027", available at <https://www.smart.edu.ro/>, accessed 17.03.2022

- Only 10% of the country's population has superior digital skills (compared to 11% of Bulgaria's population), making Romania last in the E.U.
- Young people aged between 16-24 years have basic digital skills at or above 56%, compared to the European situation, where the percentage of young people in this age group is 80%.
- Because only 35% of Romanians have basic skills in using software, Romania is on the penultimate place in the European. Another issue is related to the digitization of the education and training system, which has become a priority since 2016, when the Presidential Administration launched the country project called "Educated Romania"³. Romania did not have a national strategy on the digitization of education until 2020, when this SMART-Edu document was developed. On the other hand, it is not known to what extent the country has fulfilled its commitments set out in the National Strategy for the Digital Agenda 2020, whether it has assessed the implementation of the strategy and whether it will ever report on its situation. In this context, it should be mentioned that Romania also has a poor performance in terms of digitalization of companies, digital public services and digital skills of citizens, due to the slow pace of progress and the turbulent evolution of the political situation. As a result, in the Digital Economy and Society Index (D.E.S.I.), the country ranks 26th out of the 28 E.U. member states at the level of 2020.

Regarding the use of the internet, the situation was not at all encouraging at the level of 2019, as it results from the following data:

- Only 28% of the population uses the Internet at least once a week, and Romania ranks second to last in the European Union.
- 17% of the population has never used the Internet, with Romania ranking 5th in the E.U.
- Digital public services are used by 50% of the citizens, compared to 70% of the European citizens, our country being on the last place in this chapter in the European Union.
- Romania ranks last in the E.U. to the online relationship between citizens and the public administration, with a percentage of 65% of the population, compared to over 90% of the European population.

³ Source: "Raport România Educată - 14 iulie 2021", available at <https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Raport%20Romania%20Educată%20-%202014%20iulie%202021.pdf>, accessed 24.03.2022

However, the Internet connection seems to be a strong point, as Romania ranks 11th in the European Union in terms of "Connectivity", i.e. the high use of very high speed broadband and the wide availability of very high capacity fixed networks, especially in urban areas. However, in 2018, 72.4% of households had access to the Internet at home. With only 49% of households subscribing to high-speed broadband services, Romania ranks 5th in the E.U.

In terms of education, we looked at the situation before and during the pandemic. At the level of 2018, before the beginning of the pandemic, the situation presented in the official documents was as follows:

- Teachers rarely used technology to teach lessons in the classroom.
- The use of technology was limited to video projectors.
- Most students did not have access to a computer until during I.C.T. and computer science.
- Most teachers did not encourage students to use the resources available on the Internet, nor did they systematically present reliable online resources (virtual libraries, educational platforms, online magazines).

Also in 2018, school principals reported that the educational process was affected by the following issues:

- Insufficient or inadequate digital equipment.
- Lack of teachers with teaching skills for students with special needs.
- Insufficient or inadequate learning spaces.
- Insufficient or inadequate teaching materials.

At the level of 2019-2020, the degree of coverage with computers connected to the Internet for pupils and students, teachers and the administration of educational institutions was different, but did not exceed 25% for any of the existing forms of education, as follows:

- Primary and secondary education: 6.7%.
- High school education: 17%.
- Post-secondary education and foremen: 4.5%.
- Higher education: 19%.

During the same school year, when the school moved online, teachers stated that they encountered the following barriers:

- They shared with other family members the equipment needed to carry out the teaching activity.
- Others did not own such equipment.
- The internet connection was poor.

Added to this are issues related to the digital competencies of students, teachers and parents, such as:

- 37% of teachers consider themselves advanced users of new technologies, and 53% consider themselves intermediate users.
- For some students, the insufficient level of digital skills was a serious impediment to participating in online schooling.
- For this reason, some students have not been able to use various educational tools and applications autonomously.
- Two-thirds of the students did well on their own in terms of online lessons and activities, while a quarter of the students needed help in the beginning.
- Difficulties in using information technology were greater for students in rural and small towns than in large cities.
- Equally, the digital skills of parents need to be developed, especially in rural areas, in disadvantaged communities and in the case of families with children with disabilities, in order to be able to support their children in online schooling.

Regarding distance learning activities, teachers reported the following issues:

- Lack of digital resources in the field of the subject taught (digital content).
- Lack of time to understand and use digital tools and resources properly.
- Lack of the exercise of using the technological environment for the design and development of complex teaching activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools to move rapidly from traditional teaching to online teaching and has forced the digital education system to adapt. During the pandemic, information technology was used in education at the highest level. The audience of students, teachers, parents, the local community and the authorities was forced to become aware of the significant gaps and shortcomings related to digital skills, connectivity and the use of information technology in education. Moreover, he drew attention to the opportunities and risks involved in online teaching. It was found that, in addition to the teaching activity, the management and administration of schools must be digitized, respectively the communication and collaboration between school and family, local administration, companies and non-governmental organizations.

Fortunately, there are also positive aspects of the digitalization of education in Romania, namely:

- The national education system takes into account the European definition of the digital key competence, as well as the other European key competences.

- There is a graduate training profile, including for digital key competence, which has been developed on competence levels - elementary, functional and developed.
- Digital competence is included in the national curriculum as a separate subject, in two forms: optional subject for primary education and compulsory subject for secondary education (secondary, high school and vocational).
- Information and communication technology is a compulsory subject for all fields of study, profiles and specializations / professional qualifications.
- In terms of the number of hours, the highest number of hours is allocated to I.C.T. in high school and vocational school, and in the gymnasium, the number of hours is at the level of the European Union average.
- Vocational training standards for vocational school, high school and post-secondary school / masters have digital competence integrated in the units of results of general or specialized technical learning.
- Starting with 2010, in Romania the digital competencies of all high school graduates are evaluated and certified, by taking a compulsory test in the baccalaureate exam.
- The educational platforms used nationwide for the online school were G Suite for Education, Microsoft Teams, Adservio, Kinderpedia and Edu2⁴. The free use of foreign learning platforms was possible due to the partnerships agreed by the Romanian Government with Google and Microsoft.

III. Open educational resources (O.E.R.) in Romania

The creation of open educational resources was a strategic line of development, provided in the Digital Agenda of Romania 2020 and in the Partnership Agreement⁴ between Romania and the E.U. 2014-2020. In Romania, the legislative framework that allows the development and use of this type of resources consists of the National Education Law (law no. 1/2011) and law no. 8/1996 on copyright and related rights.

In the field of O.E.R. there have been several initiatives, including the following:

⁴ Source: "Strategia Națională privind Agenda Digitală pentru România 2020", available at <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategia-nationala-agenda-digitala-pentru-romania-2020c-20-feb.2015.pdf>, accessed 24.03.2022.

- The initiative of the Ministry of National Education, formalized by the Note on open educational resources, sent to the county school inspectorates in November 2017, which refers to all forms of education.
- The C.R.E.D. project, which aimed at primary and secondary education.
- Digitaledu.ro platform.

The initiative of the line ministry was aimed at creating the O.E.R. collections, which would later be integrated into the Virtual School Library⁵. Due to the fact that the process was decentralized and uncoordinated at the higher level, many synopses were recorded. Addressing these collections by O.E.R. it belongs to each school inspectorate, which led to the installation of a certain chaos. At this point, it will be difficult for a teacher to search for a particular O.E.R., because there is no search engine nationwide, so he will be forced to search the web page of each school inspectorate. The tree structure of these pages, the organization by levels of education and classes, respectively by curricular areas and specialized disciplines / modules is far from simplifying things. On the other hand, the evaluation process and the selection of resources at the level of each inspectorate is bureaucratic and time consuming, both for those proposing O.E.R. and for evaluators. In November 2020, according to the document, 12214 open educational resources were posted on the websites of the inspectorates. Due to the faulty and decentralized way in which it was worked, only 1234 resources (i.e. 10% of the total) could be selected to be uploaded on the national platform, as the existing resources were found to be of little use.

The C.R.E.D. project, carried out with European funding in the period 2017-2020, represented a step forward in the process of integrating these resources in primary and secondary education⁶. A complex collection of O.E.R.s has been created within the project, published both on the project's website and on the EDUCRED YouTube channels, which can be accessed nationwide. Moreover, actions have been taken to disseminate good educational practices and to promote the resources created, with the aim of exploring and highlighting them by teachers.

The digitaledu.ro platform, developed by the University of Bucharest⁷, comes to solve the shortcomings found in the other two initiatives presented

⁵ Source: "Rețele de resurse educaționale deschise (R.E.D.), înființate la nivelul inspectoratelor școlare județene", Ministerul Educației Naționale, Comunicat de presă, București, 4 noiembrie 2017, available at <https://www.edu.ro/nota-ministerului-educa%C8%9Biei-na%C8%Bionate-privind-crearea-re%C8%9Belei-de-resurse-educa%C8%9Bionate-deschise-%C3%AEn> accessed 15.10.2021

⁶ Source: <https://www.educared.ro>

⁷ Source: <https://digitaledu.ro/resurse-educationale-deschise/>

above. Thus, in the section "Open Educational Resources" there are resources designed for high school and post-secondary school, including specialized modules (technical and economic). On the other hand, certain resources were approved, even if the evaluation grid used was not published, as is the case of the operational procedure at the level of the county school inspectorates. The "Activity Ideas" section allows teachers to approach the lessons in a creative way, specific to the universal design of learning, integrating O.E.R. in the lesson⁸. We must keep in mind that the use of educational applications and educational platforms requires their knowledge by both teachers and students, which requires an acceptable level of digital knowledge and a certain methodology of teaching lessons with their help.

The experience gained from these initiatives has highlighted the following issues:

- There must be a vision and a unitary approach to identify, select and organize the educational resources open to the Virtual School Library.
- O.E.R. they must be reusable and contribute to changing the teaching process.

Looking for open educational resources to use in the classroom, I noticed that in our country there are the following categories of O.E.R.:

- Directories of learning objects - curricular auxiliaries available on the web page www.tvet.ro
- Digital handbooks, available on the clasadigitala.ro website.
- Handbooks in electronic format, available in pdf format and posted on the manual.edu.ro website.
- Educational platforms - Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Adservio, Softschool
- Edu Moodle Romania Network
- Open projects - C.R.E.D. (Open Curriculum, Education Relevant to All)
- The YouTube channel of the Ministry of Education, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLxO8-C91Lp92xRiauh3jJUZX12e32QTsU>
- Software applications: Liveworksheets, LearningApps, Worldwall, Kahoot, Livresq, Testmoz, Quiziz, Socrative, Edpuzzle, Asq, EquatIQ, Kidibot, Canva etc.
- Online platforms at the level of the European Union, which have Romanian language versions: Tax Edu, Napo, "Our planet, our future", Living Democracy.

⁸ Source: <https://digitaledu.ro/activitati-de-invatare-digitala/>

- O.E.R. collections on various web pages:
 - <https://www.twinkl.ro>
 - <https://scoalapenet.ro>
 - <https://www.digialiada.ro>
 - <https://www.didactic.ro>.

IV. The evaluation of the O.E.R.

The open educational resources posted on the web pages of the county school inspectorates were evaluated according to evaluation sheets or evaluation grids in the structure of the operational procedure that refer to the creation of the network of open educational resources within the county school inspectorate. In the case of some inspectorates, this procedure has been reviewed two or three times, starting in 2017 and ending in 2021.

Initially, an evaluation form prepared in 2017 had the following structure⁹:

- Identification data for author and O.E.R.
- Quality criteria
- Data for identifying evaluators.

Among the quality criteria considered are:

- The scientific correctness of the content.
- Elaboration of the content from a methodological and terminological point of view.
- Compliance with applicable curricular or extracurricular requirements.
- Contribution to the training and development of the competencies provided by the school curriculum for the respective discipline and module.
- Encourages creative thinking and critical thinking.
- Facilitates the transfer of knowledge from theory to everyday life.
- Mention the sources of information used correctly.
- Originality of the resource.
- General drafting criteria.

Each criterion has a certain score, and the total score is 100 points. The score given by the evaluators is written on the evaluation sheet of the respective resource, being accompanied by the corresponding argumentation. The result of the evaluation is marked "admitted" or "rejected". If the evaluation result is negative, there is a part in the evaluation form for the recommendations made

⁹ Source: "Procedura RED-CL" available at <https://www.isj-cl.ro/index.php/resurse-educationale-deschise-red> accessed 29.11.2021

by the evaluators, so that the respective resource obtains the “admitted” rating. In the revised version, the document is called “Evaluation grid for Curricular Educational Resources used in the instructional-educational process”. The grid structure includes the following chapters:

- Identification data for the author and O.E.R., at which the type of educational resource and the date of evaluation were entered.
- Quality indicators, which include the following elements:
 - The concordance between the scientific information and the school curriculum in force or the standard of professional training.
 - Timeliness and correctness of the content of the resource.
 - Adapting the content to the level of study and to the particularities of the students.
 - How to present the content of the resource.
 - Typing requirements and expression rules.
 - Formative component (practical applications).
 - Creativity and originality.
 - How to design learning tasks and assessment items.
 - Capitalizing on students' life experience.
- Data for the identification of evaluators, which are three in number, compared to the initial situation, when their number was not specified.

For each indicator in the grid, the result of the partial evaluation is marked with "Yes" or "No". The result of the final evaluation is marked "admitted" or "rejected".

At university level, the specialists proposed another evaluation grid, which takes into account two aspects (Istrate, O., and Ștefănescu, D., 2021):

- Anchoring the resource elaborated in the pedagogical theory.
- The value of the respective resource for the improvement of the educational process.

The purpose of developing this grid was to promote quality open educational resources, which would allow the development of education with the help of digital technology. In order for such a resource to meet those requirements, it must have certain specific attributes:

- Multimedia integration
- Interaction with content
- Integration of educational games
- Possibility to be adapted, corrected, updated and completed.

The proposed grid has four sections, which include certain evaluation criteria, as follows:

- Prerequisites (20 points):
 - Description of the resource and its classification in a certain category.
 - The fact that it is not discriminatory.
 - Accessibility.
 - Indicate the sources used.
- Learning content (30 points):
 - Scientific correctness.
 - Relevance to learning.
 - Content organization.
- The didactic approach (30 points):
 - Expected learning outcomes.
 - Teaching strategy.
 - Motivation, attractiveness and didactic innovation.
 - Interactivity and collaboration.
 - Progress indicators.
 - Alternative or complementary routes.
- Functionalities, interface, appearance (20 points):
 - Use of the resource.
 - Reuse and integration in the lesson.
 - Visual design aspects.
 - Audio, video and graphics quality.

The interpretation that an evaluator gives to the criteria or indicators included in the evaluation grid depends on his / her teaching experience and the level of personal training, being a subjective factor. On the other hand, the identification of evaluation criteria relevant to O.E.R. it is quite difficult to achieve, for some reasons:

- Various possibilities - pedagogical, technical and functional, covered by an open educational resource.
- Variety of media used to create a resource (text, image, audio, video or mixed).
- The multitude of types of educational situations in which the respective resource can be used.
- Experience and training of the evaluator.

As a result, the pedagogical values of an open educational resource must be analyzed in a concrete use situations.

V. Case study

On the digitaledu.ro platform I found open educational resources for the discipline "Entrepreneurial Education", which is included in the curriculum for the 10th grade of high school. These resources are posted in two different sections of the platform, namely: "Open Educational Resources" (two resources) and "Activity Ideas" (nine resources). Of these, only the resources in the O.E.R. section are approved.

Compared to the existing chapters in the "Entrepreneurial Education" textbook for the 10th grade (authors: Lazăr. N. and Mitrache, M., Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012), the open educational resources cover only a third of the topics. For the topic "Business plan and its implementation problems" there are three open resources, posted in two different sections: one resource (which is approved) in the section "Open Educational Resources" and two other resources in the section "Activity Ideas". For the topic "Obtaining the product", two open resources were posted, both in the "Activity Ideas" section. There are two resources that correspond to some sub-topics in the textbook and are posted in the "Activity Ideas" section, entitled "Starting and Running a Business. Establishing the object of activity", respectively "The process of setting up and running of the business". However, there are topics for which no open educational resources have been developed.

We analyzed the open educational resources listed above from the point of view of the O.E.R user, i.e. the type of activity for which the resource was created, the support used to make the resource, the existence of workload for students, the existence of a worksheet or a documentation sheets, expected learning outcomes, (probably) how to carry out the activity and the working time required. We have centralized the data obtained in the following table (see table 1).

The two approved resources, posted in the section "Open Educational Resources" are structured similarly: the lesson itself and the assessment part of the knowledge acquired by students in the lesson. Even if it is stated that the resources were designed for a one-hour lesson, their use in practice in the classroom means a longer time - one hour for the lesson itself and one hour for assessing students' knowledge. Resources should be modified accordingly so that they are within the set time limits. On the other hand, lessons abound in unstructured information. The teacher must make an intervention through the lesson plan to specify the stages of learning, otherwise students do not cope with the multitude of theoretical notions presented in the content of those resources.

Table 1. O.E.R. developed for the discipline "Entrepreneurial Education":

Nr. crt.	The name of O.E.R.	The type of activity	Support used	Workload for students	Worksheet / Documentation sheet	Expected results	How to carry out the activity	Working time	Remarks
1	Business plan	Activities suite	Video YouTube Text Images	Questionnaire Crossword puzzle	---	---	---	1 hour / week	Approved "O.E.R." Section
2	The qualities of the entrepreneur	Activities suite	Video YouTube Text Images	Questionnaire Skill test Application LearningApp	---	---	---	1 hour / week	Approved "O.E.R." Section
3	Business plan	Homework	Padlet Voki	Creating an avatar	Yes	Yes	Individual	2 weeks	"Activity Ideas" Section
4	The business plan and its implementation issues	Class activity	Voki Lino	Creating an avatar	---	---	Individual	---	"Activity Ideas" Section
5	Legislative conditions of entrepreneurial activities	Homework	Bubble	Concept map	---	Yes	Individual	---	"Activity Ideas" Section
6	Starting and running a business. Establishing the object of activity	Homework	WordArt Padlet	Cloud of words	---	Yes	Collaboration between students	1 week	"Activity Ideas" Section
7	Starting and running a business. Obtaining the product	Class activity	WordArt Video YouTube	Cloud of words Speech	---	Yes	Collaboration between students	---	"Activity Ideas" Section

Nr. crt.	The name of O.E.R.	The type of activity	Support used	Workload for students	Worksheet / Documentation sheet	Expected results	How to carry out the activity	Working time	Remarks
8	Obtaining the product	Class activity	Padlet	Virtual notice board	---	Yes	Collaboration between students	---	"Activity Ideas" Section
9	Product promotion	Class activity	WordArt Padlet	Virtual notice board Flyer	Yes	Yes	Collaboration between students	2 weeks	"Activity Ideas" Section
10	The process of setting up and running the business	Homework	GoConqr	Concept map	---	Yes	Individual	---	"Activity Ideas" Section
11	Risk and success in business	Class activity	Google Docs Padlet	Virtual notice board Essay	---	Yes	Collaboration between students	1 hour / week	"Activity Ideas" Section

As for the educational resources posted in the "Activity Ideas" section, they have a similar structure. The proposed work tasks for students are specific to the educational applications used to create the respective resource, e.g. virtual notice board, custom avatar, concept map, cloud of words. To accomplish these tasks it is necessary for the teacher to know the methods of critical thinking. Working time is not specified for each educational resource.

On the other hand, the use of educational applications (Padlet, Voki, Lino, WordArt, Bubble, GoConqr) and the Google Classroom platform requires their knowledge both by the teacher who teaches the class and by his students. Moreover, it is necessary to have a properly equipped computer lab with an internet connection, in order to be able to keep the lessons at a high level. Using YouTube videos requires students to practice their English language skills and knowledge because they are not translated into Romanian.

These open educational resources are an update on the content of the lessons and the methods of teaching, learning and assessment for the discipline "Entrepreneurial Education", proposed by a textbook that has not been republished in the last ten years.

VI. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the digital transformation into education, in fact it forced the rethinking of education in the digital age. This transformation depends very much on the existence of digital skills of all actors involved in the educational process, on the widespread use of digital equipment, applications and educational platforms.

On the other hand, digital literacy, which is an important part of functional literacy, has proved its worth, as mastering digital technology is essential for both personal and professional life of people.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Nora Codruța CURTA

"Iulian Pop" Economic College Cluj-Napoca. Graduate of the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Technology, "Babeș-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca. Graduate of the Faculty of Economics, "Babeș-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca. Ph. D. in Management and Industrial Engineering. Teacher teaching degree I.

She teaches specialized economic disciplines. She is interested in strategic management, pedagogy and methodology of teaching economic subjects. She published works in the field of strategic management for tourism businesses, dictionaries, case studies and supported communications at scientific symposia and conferences. codrutacurta@gmail.com.