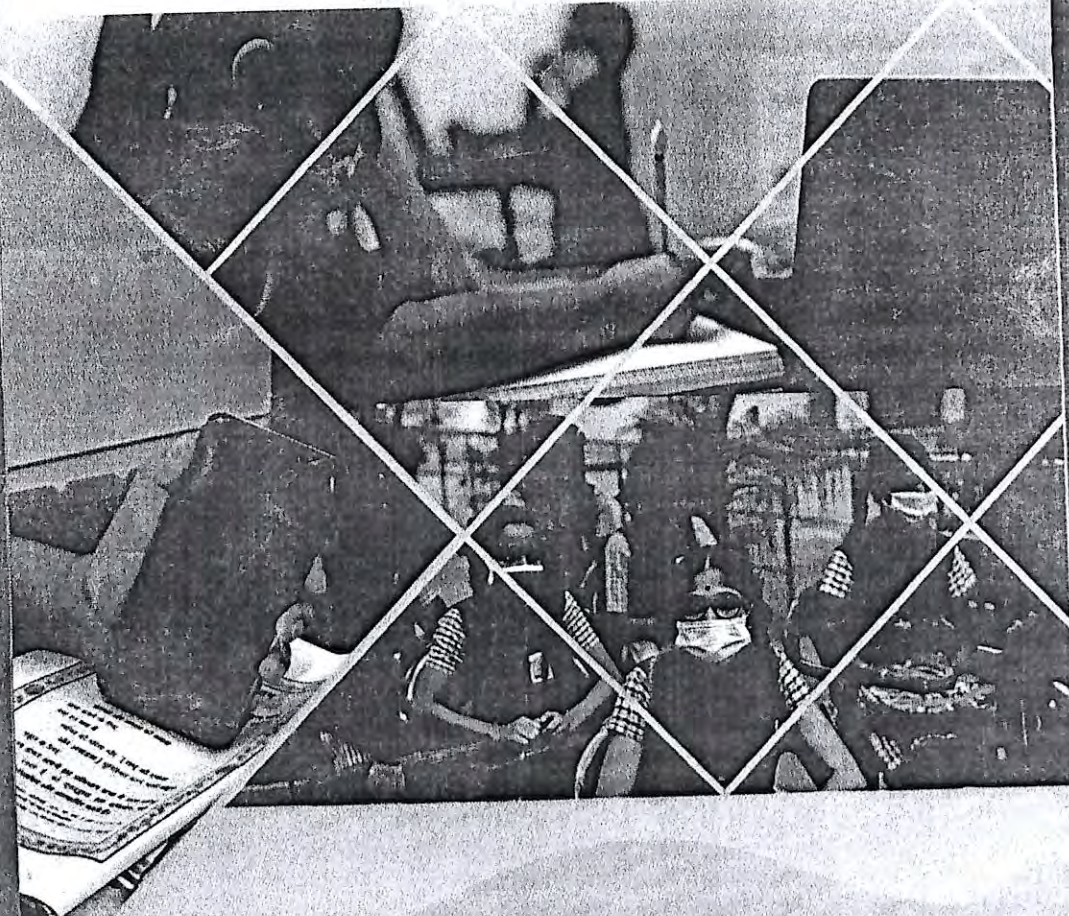



COVID-19 AND INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Challenges and Opportunities



Dr. Dhiraj Singh




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The Revolution in Education: New Normal or New Abnormal

Prof. Steven A. Lobo

Abstract

The pandemic has shown us a reality that had already begun but it was too soon for us to absorb. Life changed for everyone. Education too saw drastic changes all of a sudden. We were thrown into the uncertain and the unknown. However, thanks to technology, academic life didn't come to a standstill. New challenges have been taken up with different applications that have helped the teaching community continue with their work. Some are still apprehensive while many have taken on the challenge and are working with full gusto to make sure that students understand what is being taught. Efforts are being made from all quarters, be it students, teachers, institutions or organizations that are building new software, that will help bridge the gaps and let the new interface be successful. Eventually online teaching is going to stay. Blended teaching is the need of the hour so that we are ready and prepared for the future.

Key Words: Online teaching, Education, Technology, Teachers, Presentations.

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Introduction

The months following March 2020 saw unprecedented changes in the world, especially in India. A whole new scenario got created - uncertain, unpredictable, scary, dark and unfathomable. At first the ghastliness of the situation wasn't known. No one would in their wildest of dreams ever predict what was going to come in the months ahead. Life was going to take a turn that no one alive has ever seen! Everyone had questions to ask, but no one had answers. 'Why' was the one big question, which, for once out of exam papers, couldn't score at all! The turbulence of the time was such that whether it was economy, politics, society, psychology or name it as one wants, everything was touched. It appeared like a raging fire, leaving back traces of smoke and ruins and rubble. Yet, nothing was burnt!

Life came to a standstill. LOCKDOWN!!! That was it. No one on the road, no movement, no vehicles, no market ... only gloomy looking roads, and slowly and gradually news of disease and death. In such a scenario education too was affected. The Maharashtra government announced on 16th March that it would postpone all university examinations. The UGC in turn asked all universities on March 19, 2020 to postpone all examinations till the end of March (Crawford, 2020). It continued till finally when they were conducted in October. Cancellation of examinations, preparation for a new year in an entirely different mode, method and procedure. Everyone was thrown into a new environment which seemed very frightening. Not many had experimented with it. The worry of what and how it is to be done? What platform? How much data? Will the home environment provide the ambience required for education in the 'work from home' mode? Well, this was going to be the new normal. Some felt it is the new 'abnormal'! Extraordinary times called for extraordinary measures. Thus emergency eLearning patterns were soon to be adopted to make a quick transition from face-to-face classes to online learning systems (Murphy, 2020), thus throwing the limelight on Learning Management Systems and Content Management Systems.

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Objectives

The aim of this paper is to understand the new normal that has come into being. Academicians have risen up to the occasion and are dealing with it very effectively. However, there are certain pros and cons that need to be looked into. This paper brings to light the personal experiences of the author in light of the pandemic and online teaching.

Virtual Teaching in Present Situation

Being an educationist, the author was never new to technology as such, but was certainly new to the work from home culture. Preparing online lessons, PPTs, videos, material, etc. was in the offing, but that it would be thrown directly into teachers' faces, and that too so soon, was certainly not expected. All so soon teachers started scrambling to attend online sessions, faculty development programmes, etc. to get adept with online teaching. There was frantic activity in equipping oneself with tools that one hadn't used before, be it Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Webex, and the like.

Then began a time of new learning. Learning how to talk and present in front of 'nobody'. A difficult endeavor of speaking to a camera, an interface that had to be dealt with very unwillingly! The trying moments of practicing delivery of lectures in a virtual world took everyone away from the conventional mode of teaching, i.e. the classroom and chalk and talk method. In the classroom at least the chalk dust settled down. However, in the virtual classroom the 'cloud' wouldn't settle! It seemed as though it wanted more and more since the space available was humungous.

With this also began the preparations for online lectures with Power Point Presentations (PPTs). Care had to be taken as to how the PPTs were prepared. Not too many words, well spaced out, colour combinations, suitable images, audios, videos, etc. The PPTs had to convey their message well. It would have to be shared on screen as the lecture would be delivered simultaneously. Till now teachers knew of PPT as the one best method of teaching with technology. With the different programmes being conducted all over, a whole

new gamut of apps became visible. These were already in use by some but for the others it was a completely new world!

Those who were not and still not used to technology found it very difficult to handle this new arena. They needed the help of those who are used to dealing with technology. One fine day lectures did begin online! The new normal had begun. All too soon everyone was thrown into an uncertainty – “Will I be understood the way I speak in the class?”, “Will the students actually be listening to me?”, “How will I maintain discipline if everyone tries to talk at the same time?”, “Will I be able to solve queries effectively?”, etc. After the initial hiccups of network issues, login issues, wrong classrooms, wrong passwords, and the like, it moved on smoothly. The outcome of this is that the creativity of teachers and instrumental nature of academics came to the fore. It also showed how higher education lacked research into digital pedagogies (Tesar, 2020).

The advantage of virtual teaching was that everyone remained safe. No contact, maintenance of social distancing, and the best of all – no worries about contracting the Covid-19 disease. Time was saved in travelling, costs were saved both for the institution as well as for teachers. The greatest advantage was that learning did not come to a full stop. It now was to continue in a different form. The virtual classroom was born. There were instances wherein students who didn't belong to the class entered in and it was difficult to identify who was a student and who wasn't. Possibilities were that User IDs and Passwords were being shared with persons who didn't belong to the institution. It was difficult to ascertain as to which students were grasping what was being said and who weren't. In the physical classroom it would be evident from the look on the face of the student that s/he hadn't understood. In the virtual classroom one couldn't even make out whether the student was actually present even though s/he was logged in.

What a trying time for teachers, and of course for students too! For many teachers it was such a new arena that adjustments became difficult. Technology is easier in the hands of youngsters than middle-aged people. Students have grown with technology because they have been surrounded by it since birth. Their adult

life will certainly be fully immersed into digital technology (Iivari, 2020). As the days of 'work from home' went by new problems emerged. Students couldn't be logged in for long because the data pack that they had subscribed to wouldn't be sufficient for all the lectures. By the time it was the second last or last lecture their data would be over and hence they would get thrown out of the classroom. The teacher, not knowing what has gone wrong, would feel that students are deliberately leaving the classroom. The author has spoken with several students and it came to light that they couldn't afford a bigger data pack. Some didn't even own a phone. For making presentations for their internals, some students would have to borrow the phones of their friends. At times the network would be so bad that the student couldn't be heard well as their voice cracked! It would indeed be very frustrating to go through the entire ordeal.

The advantages of the virtual teaching are many:

1. There is no need for physical space to conduct lectures.
2. A student could be anywhere in the world and still attend a lecture.
3. Those students who find it very difficult to attend lectures offline can now attend it from home. If the lectures are recorded and made available, then the student can listen to the lecture at his/her own convenience.
4. Students who are working could find this the best method of completing their higher education.
5. Environmental problems can be overcome. For e.g. when there is flooding or a breakdown in the transport system, etc. it is not possible to go to college. But in the virtual mode lectures would still go on.
6. Whenever there is a situation like a pandemic, and one has to stay home and stay safe, then the virtual mode of teaching will certainly come to the rescue.
7. There is less wastage of time. Moving from one class to another, starting off with a lecture after setting up the

infrastructure would lead to loss of almost 15 minutes. However, in the online mode the teacher is ready before the lecture begins and it is quality time all the way.

8. Students are taught how to make PPTs on cell phones, use different apps etc. which helps them be prepared for future assignments in their work life. They are better prepared to make use of technology. Some students who would never have attempted to make presentations or use new technology, are now forced to do so. That helps them get adept with technology and start performing. Apps and websites like FlyerMaker, Canva, Visme, Piktochart, MinsMaster, IShot, etc. (there are so many) are very useful. The free versions permit the student to use the basic minimum that is required from the academic point of view.
9. Now guest lectures could be conducted with ease as there is no travelling involved and it could be at the convenience of all. This enables the entire system to benefit in a great way. Earlier only some institutions benefitted from the lectures of scholars. Now an institution can invite the person and thousands can benefit because the lecture can be on a particular platform as well as on YouTube.
10. Cost cutting for everyone! Institutions, teachers and students.
11. Since recorded lectures can be made available, slow learners could listen to the lectures slowly and catch up with the rest of the class.
12. During a normal academic year, there are several activities which consume time and there is a loss of lectures. In the virtual classroom scenario such a loss is not encountered.
13. Due to certain platforms with the integration of LMS lecture notes, lecture videos, books, PDFs, etc. can all be made available to students. Those who cannot afford to take print outs or join any library can now have matter at their fingertips, which is made easily available.
14. Even co-curricular activities can be conducted online. Here the

number of students participating will be larger.

15. More time is available to the teachers as travelling time is saved. Hence, more research is possible.
16. Evaluations would be online and ongoing. It would save paper, time, money, infrastructure and energy.

As we have seen the advantages of virtual teaching, let us now unfold the disadvantages of the same:

1. It consumes a lot of data and hence becomes expensive for those who are economically weaker.
2. Students benefit much from social contact. We are social beings and hence we need to interact. This loss of social contact can be harmful in the long run. Students are known to have holistic growth in the school environment. The offline mode has snatched away the opportunity for mingling about, playing, teasing, having fun, etc. Psychological development will be affected.
3. Virtual teaching would also mean online evaluation. It isn't a fool proof method. It would be copying galore. Such evaluations aren't worth the name. It wouldn't really test the knowledge of the student.
4. It cannot match up to offline teaching. The presence of the teacher in front of the student is very different from an online interface. Solving of queries are more effective on a face-to-face basis.
5. Too much of screen time, internet activity, etc. mentally affects an individual. In our case, both the teachers and students have become vulnerable. More so the teacher because s/he has to prepare as well as teach online. There is so much of frustration, loss of appetite, mood swings, anger, etc. which are signs of a bigger problem that is soon to hit all of us.
6. The worst problem is that of institutions not making an effort to understand the problems of both students and teachers. Work from home entails several problems:

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- a. 'Smaller homes' means adjustment by everyone else in the family, to lecture timings, making of noise, the sound of the whistle and clanging of vessels whilst cooking, etc.
- b. If there is more than one individual working from home and network is available only in one corner of the house, then there is a scramble to grab that corner, as well as trying to keep the volume down. In the bargain it becomes uncomfortable.
- c. Several persons working from home tend to take up space such that those who have always been working at home suffer!
- d. Family time is compromised because work from home is actually taking up more time than when one was working from the workplace. This is leading to more frustration and problems in family life.
- e. Need one mention that if even one family member is affected by the Corona virus what the situation would be!
- f. The disturbances from around the home can't be done away with. That affects the quality of the online work. This isn't the fault of the person working from home. However s/he is accountable for how s/he works!
- g. The author has lectures from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm, of course, it is staggered through the day with a maximum of 4 lectures in a day, a total of 20 lectures in a week. With this schedule, adjusting with household chores becomes difficult and leads to a lot of stress.

Conclusion

With the points made above, it is necessary to note that virtual teaching has both its pros and cons. The cons far outweigh the pros. However, it cannot be done away with. Blended teaching would be the best method in the near future. Most of the classes could be offline. Only a few could be taken online; whereas all projects, assignments and co-curricular activities could be taken online. This would help in saving resources, time and energy. At the same time, it would not be a regressive policy. The future is going to bring in more of technology in our hands that will make

life easier and more comfortable. We have to be ready to brace for what is coming. An effort on our part to understand the need of the hour and how we can utilize what we have at hand to the maximum is the best possible option. Another important suggestion that has been made is that higher education institutions must try to have an integrated approach wherein environmental and health courses could be included into the curriculum. Thus academia could be made more responsive to the needs of the world according to the call of the time (Toquero, 2020).

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