

19.**The Way Forward - Scope of Blended Learning in Post-Covid Scenario**

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The exploded spread of the virus Covid-19 throughout the world has brought unexpected and conspicuous changes in all the spheres of life. As a result, education - the basic component of human civilization - is swaying under the impact of this pandemic in India just like many other parts of the world. With lockdown and social distancing in our country, once it seemed as if the teaching-learning process has come to a halt. But no; as it is commonly known that every problem has a solution! This pandemic has opened up new avenues in the field of education and teaching-learning process. It has become possible with the sincere efforts of the teaching fraternity, who boldly accepted the challenges despite limited means. Teachers are trying hard to make the mare go by adopting various teaching-learning approaches. And this input has resulted in the marvellous boom of online classes, courses, webinars, conferences, workshops and so on. A great transformation can be seen in the entire strata of classroom and face to face teaching that has given place to online teaching-learning. Education system in India has always been changing as per the requirements and it always keeps pace with the technological advancements.

Online education or use of ICT is not a new concept in India. "The E-Gyankosh, a National Digital Repository of learning resources, project was started by Indira Gandhi National Open University, in 2006." (Imran, 34) The teaching fraternity had been using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools even before that. But here the vantage point of discussion is the transformation of the traditional classroom teaching i.e. the centuries' old chalk and talk platform of teaching and the budding of online and virtual classroom.

Due to the pandemic, all the schools, colleges and universities across India were abruptly closed for an indefinite period and there was an immediate need to reconsider the teaching-learning and pedagogical methods. Technology, which has always been a part of effective means of teaching, came to the forefront to aid the teaching - learning fraternity. Though it was seen as a boon by the tech-savvies, but it was a compulsion for the tech-phobics. Willing or not willing, it has become necessary for each and every teacher and taught to adopt the technology. In the pandemic, the Indian education system has been wrapped with those changes which would have taken decades otherwise. The pandemic has forced almost all the educational sectors to establish

and develop the online pedagogy as now the situation is of 'Do or Die'. The government's initiation of the 'Digital India' campaign and e-learning platforms launched by the government, MHRD and UGC in this regard are commendable. And the advantages, for the learner as well as the teacher, are of course discernible. One major advantage of e-learning is that students can learn and practise anytime and anywhere, sitting comfortably wearing loose garments, and free from the fear of being infected by the pandemic, as it is remote learning. The basic tools required are computers, laptops, smartphones or any such device able to access the internet. The teacher and the learners communicate through online classes, web meets, e-chats, video conferencing, e-mails, i-messaging, document sharing, Moodle, LMS etc. Secondly, it encourages self-learning and enhances critical thinking. Moreover, students are more engaged and independent. Internet facilities help them explore the core of the content. Freedom from the classroom hassle and restrictions of staying home due to the pandemic has provided the learners ample time for self study. Online teaching also saves time, energy and money consumed in commuting from home to educational institute and vice-versa. E-teaching is cost-effective in one more way as larger groups can be dealt with at a stretch and with great ease as compared to classical teaching.

One more basic advantage of online learning over conventional classroom teaching is that it is learner-centric. A learner can run at his own pace. In a classroom there are every kind of students - advance, average and slow learners; everyone has to follow the lessons at the same pace as it is a collective activity. Through online learning, reading materials, course materials (audio, video etc) as well as assignments are provided to learners; students can follow these study materials as per their comfort, capabilities and capacities. They can take their own time according to their potential. They can revise and repeat these course materials as per their needs without having the teacher to explain the same material; again and again. Thus they can go through and dive deep into their course materials. It is contrary to the classroom teaching where lecture is delivered to all kind of students once and at a definite period of time. Students take more interest in online learning and new kind of assignments like quizzes and games. Education gone online has made learning easier for physically handicapped students. But as a popular saying goes, 'every coin has two sides'. Online learning is not free from its own hassles and disadvantages. On one hand it provides comfortable environment but on the other, there is lack of learning environment too. The process of learning might slow down in some cases. Being in their comfort zone, students may waste and kill their time in counter-productive activities. Since the internet provides a vast and unlimited area to explore, students easily get distracted. Though it is very useful for exceptionally motivated students having intrinsic urge of learning, remote learning is not everybody's cup of tea. There will be a dearth of discipline in a student's life. Moreover the voices, noise and aroma of homely place might be another cause of distraction and

disturbance. Also, there are various health hazards posed by this method of learning, since students are constantly sitting in their places and staring at their screens. It causes a risk to their eyesight as well as their fitness since physical activities are highly barred. Such lifestyle also affects their attitude and mental health to some extent. Besides physical education, an online classroom also lacks aesthetic activities like music, dance and fine arts, which are otherwise common in many educational institutes in the country. Hence online classroom, in most cases, cannot provide over-all development to the students.

Without proper accessibility of internet, all the teaching process shatters badly. Teachers spend a lot of time and energy in creating online study materials. There is no doubt that constant practice will enable teachers to get used to online tools and use them efficiently, and in the long run it might save a lot of time and energy. But as of now, most of them are not dexterous in handling the 'new' deal of technology being used.

Face to face teaching provides scope for better queries and content clarity. Under the direct guidance of teacher, students are more attentive and participate actively. Classroom also provides motivation and competitive spirit. Interaction among students is very useful; there is growth of multiple ideas. Moreover, external check is generally essential to keep the learners on the right track.

It becomes so much time consuming for the not-so-tech-savvy whenever there are bugs, glitches and technical faults. Time is wasted in abundance whenever there are distractions due to various undesirable online suggestions by different sources because of internet connectivity. Especially the younger generation is attracted towards colourful images and videos. Moreover, internet provides numerous games which may provoke the students to play instead of studying. This means that they can continue to play these games without their parents having any objections, if they disguise the play time as their studying hours. In the absence of an educator, their attentions can be easily diverted.

Taking into view the disadvantages of digital teaching, the physical classrooms seem necessary. Physical classrooms have some specific features which are totally absent in the virtual classroom or e-learning. A teacher not only teaches the students, he/she nurtures their inner spirit; the commendable and the chiding words as well as personal touch of a teacher is very precious for the real growth of students as these words motivate and nurture them. The direct and eye-to-eye contact of the teacher and the taught cannot be compensated through digital learning. A physical classroom also inculcates values of discipline, punctuality, integrity and morality. Creative thinking, problem solving attitude and skills; feeling of responsibility, power of respecting and affection; holistic development of body, mind and soul, and time management are some of the virtues that are gained and encouraged only in the peer group and classroom

teaching. Swami Vivekananda once said, “Our real awakening takes place when we dedicate our life to extended ideal”. And these extended ideals can be realized only in the true life situations i.e. undoubtedly gained in the physical classroom. Classroom learning is best for the students belonging to lower strata and rural background as they can neither make arrangements nor can they create environment for online learning which is not a good option for them at all. There is a lack of motivation, guidance and learning environments where the primary concerns of parents is to work and earn a living. Online classrooms are also not viable for students lacking hearing, sight, or mental stability, as it is quite hard to find interactive material in sign language, Braille script, etc.

Though virtual classroom is an attempted replica of the classroom with a chalkboard and a projector; they are not the better replacement. If on one hand online education has rescued the learning from sinking, on the other it has also made us realize how important and irreplaceable a physical classroom is!

The edition of ‘The Economist’ on 4 July 2020 states, “Covid-19 is here to stay. People will have to adapt”. And actually the Post-Covid era would begin not when the virus disappears from the face of the earth, but when people would adapt them accordingly. As the vaccine for the virus is yet to be discovered, nobody knows how long the current state is going to remain. However, it is quite clear that the Post-Covid era would definitely be different from the Pre-Covid era as far as learning is concerned. The development of online learning in this pandemic period has opened up new paths of learning and it would not be possible to stand again on the same step where we left as it would be a backward motion. It is evident that e-learning tools are very much useful and beneficial in the teaching-learning process. It is quite clear now that e-learning would effectively go hand in hand with the classroom teaching. Oliver Wendell Holmes’s words make sense here, “The great thing in this world is not so much where you stand, as in what direction you are moving.”

We have experimented and learnt a lot in this Covid-era which has shown us pros and cons of e-teaching and e-learning. And it has proved the value of blended learning which seems the best strategy of teaching learning pedagogy. Blending learning can be described here as the combination of traditional classroom teaching and online tools. The disadvantages of online learning and classroom teaching can be strained through the sieve of blended learning. This blended learning could also be called flipped learning where teacher-centric approach would be replaced with learner-centric approach. Teacher would have to use engaging, involving and motivating tools instead of instructional and didactic tools so that students may learn by doing, thinking, involving, practising, and connecting ideas. The role of the teacher would flip from the instructor to the updated facilitator who would plan his sessions to make them effective for each

student and support individual learning. I would like to sum up with the words of Tony Zambito, “Instead of using technology to automate the process, think about using technology to enhance interaction.” And the result of this amalgamation of classroom facilitation and engaging online tools would be exceptionally fruitful, enriching, interesting and enlightening.

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