



Things Fall Apart: An Interventionist Approach to Reduce Social Inequity in E-learning during a Global Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has altered and curtailed the landscape of education leading to a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process. In the wake of these upending times, two gulfs have emerged unleashing and deepening the wide gap of social inequity that persists in the field of education. Covid-19 has brought the traditional classroom teaching to a standstill. Hostels/dorms are empty and schools/colleges/universities are closed. With online learning being the only prospect available to impart education in this time, it has become imperative to consider significant questions as to how education should be delivered, the challenges in the way of making it all-inclusive and whether online learning will be part of the full-time learning in the longer run. This paper is an attempt to explore these wide-ranging problems and develop a multilateral approach that is assimilated and collaborative to address the social inequities that affect the landscape of education.

Key Words: E-learning, Digital Divide, Social Inequity, Pandemic Crisis, COVID-19

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the center cannot hold...” - Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has altered and curtailed the landscape of education leading to a paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process. In the wake of these upending times, two gulfs have emerged unleashing and deepening the wide gap of social inequity that persists in the field of education. On

one hand, students enrolled at Cambridge University in the UK are preparing to attend all the courses virtually after it became the first university worldwide to announce that it is going online till summer 2021. On the other hand, a 14-year-old from an economically marginalised Dalit family studying at a Government School in India allegedly killed herself for not being able to attend online classes because of the unavailability of mobile phone. At the outset, this may appear predominantly as the economic disparity prevailing between developing and developed countries. However, the reasons are more complicated than just that. This paper is an attempt to explore these wide-ranging problems and develop a multilateral approach that is assimilated and collaborative to address the social inequities that affect the landscape of education.

With the implementation of worldwide lockdowns and norms of physical distancing being followed everywhere, the infrastructure we depended upon to make public education equitable and inclusive for everyone such as classrooms, books, teachers, and institutes is now inaccessible to the students. Almost, 1.2 billion children in 186 countries are out of the classrooms at present according to the World Economic Forum.¹ It is not merely a debate about whether online learning is effective or not. It has become a question of basic human right for those students who do not have reliable access to the online resources and distance education programs because of physiological, structural and socioeconomic barriers. Even though we have witnessed a tsunami of webinars, online discussions and virtual conferences to keep the students engaged in academic as well as creative activities and contests ranging from painting to short film making, from Yoga to Rap to nuanced writing through essays, poetry and short fiction, providing inclusive public education to everyone has become a challenge under the current condition in many jurisdictions in both the developing as well as the developed countries.

Social Inequity and Digital Divide

According to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, education is considered as a fundamental human right. It is likewise a key driver for accomplishing most Sustainable Development Goals of 2030, regardless of whether these are interrelated with universal health, eradication of poverty, gender rights, mindful and conscious consumptions of goods or peaceful coexistence. To ensure that education has a positive effect in propelling these objectives, it is important to first guarantee uniformity of chance for learning. Considering that people have different capacities and capabilities, it is ridiculous to anticipate correspondence of education results. Bourdieu and Passeron argue that education, in practice, is a “social establishment that represents and reproduces the socio-economic and cultural disparities existing in the society” (105). For instance, students who belong to economically marginalised backgrounds usually attend education institutes with bad infrastructure, lesser qualified teachers and outdated pedagogical practices in comparison to students from more affluent backgrounds who can afford institutes with excellent facilities.

The pandemic crisis has further intensified this gulf between such institutes on account of the infrastructural and technological disproportion. There are various other factors apart from the socio-economic disparity, for example, geography, gender, religion and race, that must be considered to address

¹ Cathy Li and Farah Lalani, “The COVID-19 Pandemic has Changed the World Forever”, World Economic Forum, 2 April 2020, Available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/>

the problem of social inequity in the field of education. Antoninis et al. argue that “3 per cent of the poorest rural girls completed lower secondary school” in Nigeria in 2013 while “17 per cent of the poorest rural boys and 95 per cent of the richest urban boys completed this level” in comparison (63). In India, educational inequity deserve particular attention because social disparities are not confined to economic mobility but it is also attached with the lines of caste, ethnicity and religion. Desai and Thorat elucidate that “dalit, adivasi and Muslim children fare far worse on all the education indicators when compared to forward caste Hindus” (84).

With the pandemic crisis reaching its pinnacle, the prevailing social inequity in the field of education is bound to rise. As students are unable to go physically to schools, colleges and universities, they are required to stay in touch with the teacher through online modes. The social inequity in terms of technology and infrastructure is bound to impact the education sector even more adversely during the pandemic. Social inequity in web-based learning incorporates access to foundation, accessibility of programming, equipment, data transmission, cost and preparing of staff. The interfacing of information and communication technologies (ICT) with economic, political, and social factors is termed as the “digital divide” which can manifest itself in a variety of ways ranging from the gap in the existing innovation assets and practices to guardians requiring access to one gadget at home. The digital divide resulting on account of various reasons has deepened the inequality in the education sector during the pandemic by making it difficult for students from the respective marginalised backgrounds to access the basic right to educate themselves.

To eradicate this social inequity in terms of the digital divide, we first need to analyse the factors responsible for the same. First, the economic factor plays a major role. Everyone cannot afford laptop, PC, mobile and internet connection required to access online resources. The first factor is closely interlinked with a huge disparity between demand and supply in the developing countries. Kshetri and Dholakia argue that “the cost of a PC is 5 per cent of per capita GDP in high-income countries, it is as high as 289 per cent in low-income countries” (929). The geographical location is another major factor that impacts the digital divide globally. Goldfarb and Prince posit that urban population have easier and cheaper access to ICT in comparison to those living in rural areas. Next problem is associated with the lack of required skills to access ICT (4). A large number of potential users including teachers and students worldwide lack computer skills, which is regarded as a prerequisite to access online sources. Social inequity in education, particularly during the pandemic, thus directly impacts the students based on these factors which require immediate attention and redressal from the policymakers and stakeholders involved.

Challenges in Online Learning

Covid-19 has brought the traditional classroom teaching to a standstill. Hostels/dorms are empty and schools/colleges/universities are closed. With online learning being the only prospect available to impart education in this time, it has become imperative to consider significant questions as to how education should be delivered, the challenges in the way of making it all-inclusive and whether online learning will become part of the full-time education programs in the longer run. There are a number of challenges being faced by the students, teachers, parents and policymakers to make online learning accessible for everyone. Ever since

March, we have witnessed several issues ranging from slow internet to crashing systems thus making it difficult for making distance learning accessible for everyone. First and foremost, governments need to ensure that students, as well as institutes, are equipped with infrastructure and technology to make online learning possible. As we get through this first obstruction, it is also significant to curate online learning keeping in mind students at the focal point of the pedagogy where a teacher uses the technical tools with required support and innovation.

Apart from the digital divide, online learning does not take into account the teaching assistance that is present in the face to face classroom. For example, online learning restricts two-way communication. There are technological options in WebEx or Zoom classroom to raise hands but it is not the same as the face to face teaching. Technology at the time also complicates things. For instance, a student who is required to submit assignments using Respondus might not be able to do so if his/her PC or laptop is not compatible with the software. Since most of the students and teachers are not used to it, they are still adapting to the new techniques which often makes it difficult for them to focus on learning. This may lead to unrequired distraction or digression in the middle of the learning process thus hampering its quality. A major challenge thus lies ahead for teachers and students who do not have the required skills to use ICT.

The technological culture among teachers in most education institutions needs to be remodelled. Since most of them are used to the traditional medium of instruction with minimal use of technology, the online medium to instruct and educate may seem to afflict at first. For instance, we saw how many online classes in Delhi University were disrupted after some miscreants joined the virtual classroom and started harassing the teachers. It is thus required for the decision-makers to conduct professional development program for teachers and bridge adequate plans that make technology experts available for teachers who lack the required skills or may need assistance while conducting online classes. In addition, it may also be difficult for younger students who need minimal or irregular adult supervision while accessing e-learning resources at home. They may get distracted, forget about their timetables, or might be contrarily affected by constrained social collaborations or deferred criticism from teachers. To make e-learning a personalized experience to each student, the teachers are required to research and test for recommending ways for different age groups and subjects.

With the bolstering capabilities, a number of platforms are available that are offering their services during the lockdown for free. However, it is immoral to allow these platforms to data-mine those who subscribe in the time of crisis. For instance, Panjab University issued an official circular warning employee against using Zoom classes because of its undisclosed data mining feature. Therefore, protecting students' online privacy has become a major challenge in the field of online learning at present. Considering this aspect, it is essential "to establish child-friendly spaces" in accordance with UNHCR's Emergency Handbook's first phrase so that students can participate in an inclusive, safe, supportive and conscientious environment. This can be effectively done if each jurisdiction works closely with the education institutes to design reliable and safe Learning Management Systems.

Context matters greatly while designing e-learning programs. A major challenge in the way of e-learning programmes is that we are only seeing it as a short-term approach. The present crisis has distorted academic

calendars worldwide. But, there is still too much emphasis on assignments and assessments. Alternatives need to be devised to accommodate points for missed assignments and assessments that have taken place during the shutdowns. We must understand that virtual classrooms cannot replace traditional learning techniques. It is important for education institutes to build physical classes in concurrence alongside virtual classes with a long-term goal. Social distancing may become a new normal. The real challenge is to select the right tools at this moment while keeping the future in mind. Academicians need to provide continuous learning to their students by shifting pedagogical practice to implement blended learning.

Call for an Interventional Approach

There is no precedent for reference to manage online education programs in the post-COVID-19 world. In the words of Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, “The goal is to identify and share the best innovations to keep children learning during the pandemic, and to help lay foundations for more inclusive and equitable approaches to education when the crisis subsides.”² The present situation calls for creating means and support to narrow down the physiological, structural and socioeconomic barriers so that all students worldwide can access and share e-learning resources. However, this is not the moment to search recklessly for solutions. Time is valuable and must be invested in approaching distance learning in a way that everyone must be given equal opportunity to access education without increasing the equity gap. This can be done by taking into account the prescribed procedures of UNHCR's Emergency handbook and separation taking in models from everywhere throughout the globe to roll out positive improvements in instruction for all students.

In schools of U.S.A., the e-rate program planned and regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has played a vital role in diminishing the digital divide (Jakayar 43). This program means to give a markdown to a large number of schools with the goal that they can increase moderate broadcast communications and Internet access. In the European Union, the expression "e-inclusion" was presented in 2006 by the European Commission as an attempt to reduce the social inequity in the field of e-learning by half by rearranging the ICTs by 2010 (EIU 5). The activity of the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement, 2000 in ASEAN nations established four goals, which included decreasing the digital divide inside and among the member nations. However, this has not been accomplished so far, and there is still a huge disparity between people, communities, districts and nations with respect to accessing and sharing ICTs. These approaches can be useful to reduce the difference that exists in the utilization of ICTs between people, districts, or nations.

An equitable education is critical for tackling the social inequity that lies in the field of education. Doucet et al. argue that the best way to do that is by learning from countries in South America and Africa that have been conducting distance education programs for many years by using traditional mediums like

² Angelina Jolie and Audrey Azoulay, “Closing Schools has Derailed the Lives of Kids all over the World”, TIME, 25 March 2020, Available at <https://time.com/5810017/coronavirus-school-closings-education-unesco/>

television and radio because of the inavailability of infrastructure in remote areas.³ A multi-media approach is required to ensure that education reaches all students in most jurisdictions. That is why traditional mediums like television, radio etc. could be useful in bridging the technological gaps. By citing the experiences of LINCOS and GTPNet, Kshetri and Dholakia propose that “lack of awareness and interest with the target audience are the major drawbacks” that make it difficult for e-learning to be inclusive (929). Therefore, governments worldwide along with the international agencies and technology marketers need to collaborate to make the target users aware about the advantages of such networks. To unlock the potential, a greater consensus is required amongst the international community to comprehend the prerequisites of the digitally-marginalised population and innovate the most adequate solutions to fulfil them by using the locally available resources.

Meaningful conversations and negotiations should be held with key stakeholders of various e-learning platforms that follow Education International’s Protocol on the Use of Information and Communications Technology in Education. Ever since the lockdown began, a number of online learning platforms have witnessed an increase in the number of enrolments. BYJU, a Bangalore-based firm, witnessed a 150% increase in the enrollment of new students after it announced free live sessions on its Think and Learn app, according to the statement of company's Chief Operating Officer, Mrinal Mohit⁴. Tencent classroom has become the largest used online platform after the Chinese government instructed the full-time students to resume studies using online medium and approximately 730,000 K-12 students attended classes via the Tencent K-12 Online School in Wuhan⁵. An open course on the science of happiness offered by the University of California, Berkeley has beaten its record by attracting half a million students from worldwide. Experts have already forecasted that pandemic is going to revive the interest of students in online learning. Therefore, everyone needs to focus on realistic long-term goals instead of finding a short-term fixes.

Fixing the societal inequities thus calls for an interventional approach and coordinated effort of all the concerned stakeholders to pave way for learning with long-term success rate. Developing the methods of blended learning can be useful for students in case such a situation arises again. Blended learning is a blend of online and face to face teaching. The quick stopgap solutions do not guarantee a brighter future. What is required now is developing a truly blended educational system. With the governments worldwide facing economic recession, an increased strain is placed on the public services taxes. This makes it difficult for the governments to make investments in the present situation but there is no alternative to it. The investment and innovation can help fill the digital divide and reach those who don’t have access to the required gadgets and networks. In any case, during these extraordinary occasions, teachers and policymakers need to

³ Armand Doucet, Dr. Deborah Netolicky, Koen Timmers and Francis Jim Tuscano, “Thinking about Pedagogy in an Unfolding Pandemic”, Published as an Independent Report for Education International and UNESCO, 2020.

⁴ Article published in Outlook on 6 April 2020, Available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/byjus-sees-150-jump-in-new-students-after-allowing-free-access/1793479>

⁵ Cathy Li and Farah Lalani, “Students Retain More in Online Classrooms”, 4 May 2020, Available at <https://theprint.in/india/education/students-retain-more-in-online-classrooms-shows-data/412669/>

understand the context and setting required by the students who may have long haul interruptions in their education and training.

Rising to a New Future

This pandemic can be an opportunity to address the looming problem of social inequity and introduce the imminent changes in the education system to make it inclusive for everyone. Given the vulnerability of the situation, policymakers in education should take this situation to recognize what they may have endeavoured to overlook. Truly, the pandemic has uncovered and strengthened the failings of our economy and society, including social inequity in education. These failings have consistently been obvious, and numerous individuals have since a long time ago attempted to make all of us see. However, it is not possible to ignore them anymore. This emergency has additionally uncovered how learning and education are significant, and how troublesome it is. It takes work, ability, adaptability, and backing, and it is as much about structure and technology. The pandemic can thus attract the attention of the concerned stakeholders to work on these issues to eradicate social inequity in education.

A number of online courses, MOOCs, YouTube videos now provide students with the opportunity to pursue all or part of their educations online cobbling together the courses they want to learn without any restrictions or deadlines. As many students and teachers use online mediums to impart education, their loyalties are also going to shift from the physical spaces to the virtual spaces. The present scenario will shape economic trends in the upcoming years. A number of high-school students may plan to enrol in online programs instead of traditional college programs. It can thus be seen as an opportunity to institutions with bad infrastructure to get the financial cushion and ability to get bigger online. Going ahead, we will examine separation learning with an internet learning segment. Gaining endlessly from school can be successful and important and take on numerous structures. It shouldn't be just on the web and in taking a gander at the subject of imbalance, can't be done by just anybody. Numerous examinations detail the perils of an excessive amount of screen time for understudies. Along these lines, we have to move toward educational options through a separation learning focal point.

Future learning may include a mix of coordinated (two-way learning in which students learn with the instructor simultaneously) and nonconcurrent (students adapting freely on various occasions) approaches. Believing educators to design the suitable methodology permits them to choose how students may utilize the present condition and accessible apparatuses most effectively to keep up the coherence of education, with reasonable yearnings. We propose a blend of both simultaneous offbeat learning for separation learning. A simultaneous methodology has correspondence occurring continuously taking into account the subsequent input and explanation where students can ask queries during the live lesson. A nonconcurrent approach is managed without live correspondence (blog entries, pre-recorded exercises etc.).

Besides, this has opened the door of opportunities for young educators who are flexible and proficient in using technology required for online learning. Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University organised two online workshops titled "Spring Up" and "In-Depth" during the lockdown to rejuvenate the interest of students and teachers in English literature where the young Research Scholars took

online lectures. The workshops garnered positive responses from participants of esteemed institutions from around India as well as from Srilanka, Canada and Scotland. There is an incredible assortment of subjects with fluctuating needs. Some need to be effectively converted into on the web or at-home situations. Others, for example, those subjects which require physical participation (Physical Education, Artmaking) or that require specific equipments (Woodwork, Science practical) cannot be taught outside the physical grounds or labs of the school or college. Various subjects and age require various engaging and creative ways to deal with online learning. In distance learning, it is important to be experimental and flexible as there is nobody size-fits-all. This provides prospect for young ad-hoc teachers to enter the education field.

Online education doesn't need to advocate learning methods that are ordinarily used in school/college/university through standardised teaching and assessment methods. The blended model of education can thus pave a way to recreate the kind of learning that would contribute to the organic growth of children by catering to their individual growth rather than an emphasis on uniform development. This will advance as instructors figure out what works for the students and what doesn't. Critically, toning it down would be ideal with regards to the extent of work, particularly amid vulnerability and insecurity. As this pandemic develops, educators need to use learning methods that are flexible and easily adaptable. This isn't time to be pre-occupied with long days at a PC or a work area. A break from education for about fourteen days is limitlessly not quite the same as no school/college/university for a long time. During this pandemic, what will be significant is having reliable information and rethinking practices that adjust to the conditions as they unfurl. This will support our students, guardians, instructors, staff and policymakers to look after expectation, while simultaneously remaining committed to social distancing and keeping up versatility and social association notwithstanding vulnerability. Crises inspire innovation. The plague which has led to the fall of a deeply diseased social setup, divided by wealth and poverty, privilege and plight, has also provided an opportunity at the same time for the sprouting and rise of a real humanistic and liberal education programs in future.

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