



The advent of New Media Technologies making Education accessible during Covid19: A study

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Abstract

With the outburst of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the entire globe witnessed a deadly crisis, which bought an abrupt halt in every sector (especially education) of the economy with revised lockdown impositions and shut down of infrastructure resources. The pandemic vividly disturbed the primary and higher education sector and was not allowed to conduct regular classroom studies. The sustainability of the traditional classroom education/schooling model and the continuation of academic years became a challenge for colleges and universities across the globe. The advent of new media tools and technologies enabled students and universities to gradually conduct virtual classes without letting the academic years of the student suffer due to the global glitch. Rather, the new media added up to educational opportunities for the masses and not just the students in times of pandemic. The research aims to study the role and responsibility of new media in carrying out a balance between the learning and training priorities in India. It further seeks to study the drastic changes of education (e-learning) with the functioning of new media, enhancing and sustaining the education sector in the extremely challenging situation of the global pandemic, Covid-19.

Keywords: Higher Education, New Media Tools, Students,

Introduction

Education is one of the prime attributes that make up the future of any economy. Being a fundamental right (Right to education) of every citizen, it is equally viable and necessary to pertain and build a strong, developed and worthy future. Education not just adds to the skills of the student but leads to healthy grooming of physical, social and mental aspects of a child's life. Education is an exponentially essential factor that can help in the sustainability of resources and future as with knowledge, one can learn the optimum utilisation of information or resources which results in innovation, discoveries and further experimentation.

In the times of Covid 19, the world witnessed the complete shutdown of businesses and institutions after WHO declared the tough times as a serious health emergency. The nationwide lockdown was imposed to bring the fluctuating deadly conditions into control. More than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries were affected by school closures due to the pandemic.¹ More than 75 million children and youth throughout the world have had their education disrupted due to forced relocation, climate change-related disasters, and long-term crises. With the spread of COVID-19, that number is increasing at an unprecedented rate. This led to the shutdown of educational institutions across the world as conducting classes in the classroom was against the government guidelines. The epidemic has produced an unprecedented crisis in the education sector, affecting both students and educators in terms of continuing educational services, completing assessments and even for evaluation purposes. The first lockdown in India was imposed on 24th March 2020, but schools granted holidays to students much earlier sensing the severity of the pandemic. Initially, everyone was unaware of how long the lockdowns will prevail and the world would come back to normalcy. But soon, it was not much difficult to predict that the situation was grave and unlock would not happen any soon.

Understanding the pattern, the schools and colleges had to come up with a solution where they could carry on with the classes without wasting/disturbing the academic year of the students and the entire curriculum cycle. This is where the new media technologies came into action and provided a platform where the students and educators could virtually gather and communicate. The universities/school institutions began conducting online classes for students from kindergarten to graduates on digital infrastructure such as Zoom Meetings, Google Meet and classroom, Microsoft Teams etc. This online practice is continued for a year and so on and has eventually given rise to the culture of 'Study-from-home' or 'home schooling'. Most teachers had a challenging time maintaining children's education due to concerns such as student involvement, planning and implementation of online lessons, a shortage of teaching tools, and problematic access to technology. Even though the educators as well as the students and their parents were not well versed with online technologies, but with time they gradually adapted and learnt the new ways of attainment of education. The world has to adapt to the dynamic of its workings, and therefore in circumstances where the infrastructure of the countries was practically shut down, there was a quick shift to the digital paradigm. Therefore, with the growth of e-learning, where instruction is done remotely and on digital platforms, the education sector has altered tremendously and drastically. The research paper aims to study the effectiveness of Online education in the changing trends and dynamic behaviour of society. It also highlights the shortcomings of the virtual learning model.

¹World Economic Forum- <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/>

The shift of Educational tools from Classrooms to Virtual Classrooms

Education in Covid lockdowns could majorly be possible because of two prime technological advances. Firstly, the availability of Mobile phones to everyone irrespective of the economical divide of the society and secondly, the accessibility of high-speed Internet by the service providers. The year 2016 was a year that saw huge transformations in a way that enabled the industries and their communication to advance on digitalization on a massive scale with convenient accessibility. With the cheap and mass availability of mobile sets and the data explosion by Jio and Airtel; India emerged as the second-largest Internet and Smartphone technology using nation with over 350 million connected citizens. With this shift, everything else had to shift to digital and new media for sustainability and better opportunities. Access to high-speed internet at an affordable price stoked appetites and opened up a new online environment for users across the country. This has resulted in a significant change in how people obtain knowledge and news.

With the practical application of virtual classes and sessions for school and college-going students, digital technology became the medium for communication. The notes, books, assignments, examinations, evaluations, assessments etc were all programmed and processed with pdfs and online documentations which were sent across users within seconds by a mere click, eliminating any physical activity involved. The approach was constant for every class i.e., from primary classes to secondary and even above for the under-grads. The best advantage for the youth and children happened with the repercussions of the new online education approach wherein at such young age they were well versed with the digital workings, terminologies and trends that would be a casual part of lives for upcoming generations. It is noted that the ability of kids is much higher than even youth in aspects of grasping the technology, it's working and making optimum utilisation of the same. At the same time, it is no hidden truth that digital media will overtake rest every form of media in the coming decade. The world is moving rapidly towards globalisation and modernisation which is high on innovations and technologies abide by the newest form of media that is 'New Media' and by being skilled and handy towards the platform caters a huge opportunity for young minds. This model of online teaching was a blessing in disguise for the educational sector and students who would not have to waste their academic years sitting idle at home.

The medium gave a new perspective to the education sector where institutions re-analysed the purpose and importance of education, learning and training. It allowed the education providers to re-think better subjects, methodology and engagement. Many educational institutes came up with short and long-term online courses for students to access for the future in-depth learning experience. Education and learning extended beyond the school/university curriculum where anybody could learn about their interests and curiosity on digital platforms like Udemy, Coursera, YouTube etc. An anonymous sample who is a graduate of 2019 discussed the very same aspect of learning via digital platforms during a global health emergency. She told, *"Education never ends and in a fast pacing and ever-changing world, everyone has to be trained and updated. I always wanted to learn about a lot of data techniques and analysis which is a part of my dynamic profession. Apart from this, I had inquisitiveness regarding Ayurveda and Herbs. During the pandemic, I could easily achieve my goal of learning as everything was available online. I*

managed to complete the 6-month courses without making my schedule hectic as the time of conveyance and travelling got eliminated." This brought us to an observation that online learning is convenient and time-saving for a learner who has a packed schedule or is committed to working deadlines. In the times of lockdown, prestigious institutions like Harvard, Oxford, Indian Institute of Management, Indian Institute of Technology, IGNOU, open universities etc offered a wide variety of courses for all streams such as Science, Commerce and humanities at a free cost for students to access and make use of their time. This was a great initiative to boost up the spirit of learning and online education. Another positive element of such courses was that they enabled customised education for every individual as per the needs and wants. It gave leverage to the teachers to mould and edit the student's engagement by bringing modern tools into the picture. For instance, asking the student to prepare and present PPTs or indulge in an online debate conference and talk shows organised by institutions etc. This breaks the monotony and adds to the perspective and memory of the learner.

Apart from the curriculum, online education also boosted the morale of students who felt nervous at offline stage performance and public speaking. As per the study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health, 74% of students have speech anxiety and find offline involvement frightening but online classes have provided them with a platform to rise above this anxiety as practically they don't have to face a crowd. Slowly and gradually the students would let go of their fear and would be a better version of their selves by putting up their opinion before everyone. In a way, Online degrees will inspire students to participate more actively in class.

Acknowledging the efficiency of Virtual Learning and Artificial Intelligence (for monitoring the growth), the introduction of the National Digital Educational Architecture is a futuristic part of the Narendra Modi government's Budget 2020. (NDEAR) *"for administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, automation and delivery of educational courses, training programs, or learning and development programs."*² The policy initiated by The Ministry of Education & Literacy, Government of India, came up with innovative, creative, diverse contextual solutions for various communities such as parents, students, teachers, administrators etc to simplify their journey of virtual communication and learning.

Digital Divide: one of the major shortcomings of the Online education model

The digital media turned out to be a saviour in such a crisis but to some extent, this teaching methodology was not effective and efficient for students studying in rural areas where the students and educators faced several challenges with the accessibility of such medium. In a survey conducted by TOI (Times of India), the study proclaims that 11% of rural families brought smartphones during the pandemic when they were struggling for a livelihood. The survey also shows that only 2% of the rural students' population received work material and handouts on WhatsApp. The margin of a divide amongst rich and poor was

²NDEAR policy by the government <https://www.ndear.gov.in/>

conveniently visible where the biased distribution of resources is highlighted. Catering to the new educational strategy, UNESCO identifies certain sections of students in societies who would be adversely affected by the changing norm; the low wage income group, ethnic minorities, migrants, labour class, differently-abled with special needs, remote rural area and tribal regions.³ It is evident that due to the lack of resources, the marginalised and economically backward students would not be able to attain proper and scheduled education while at the same place even the educators would not be able to give their best in this methodology due to the disparity, abrupt shift and lack of training on such medium. Understanding the depth of the situation, UNESCO drafted UNESCO's future of education synthesis report⁴ which ensured different techniques and solutions for kinds of learners as well as educators in India. Secondly, the Introduction of LMS (Learning Management System⁵) has created a vital growth opportunity for students who pursue internships and part-time jobs. It is a digital learning environment driven by Artificial Intelligence, that organises and coordinates all parts of a company's training initiatives. It also keeps track of user information such as their user profile, job duties, and preferences to provide individualised or customised service. This way the students learn what their desired field and profession expects from them before taking up a full-time job. LMS also helps the educators to coordinate training with other development activities like mentoring and performance evaluations.

A huge challenge that stood as a barrier between online education and accessibility to students was the limited Internet plan while the ones falling into the category discussed below (mainly, rural areas, marginalised and tribal groups) do not have internet connectivity at their places which means zero access to information and total cut off from school institutions. Interrogated for the same, one of the samples who is a house help by profession, elaborated their children's struggle while attending online classes, *"We could only afford one smartphone in the family and I have 2 children who take classes on alternate days as they both are in different grades. When my son takes classes, my daughter has to skip hers while the next day my son takes leave and the daughter attends the class. This leads to a loss of understanding of concepts and a lack of concentration. Stretching my budget, I have asked my neighbour to teach my daughter tuition classes which costs Rs. 700 per month but I have no choice."* The sample study showcases the lack of digital resources as a hindrance for children and their education. Moreover, after paying thousands to schools, it is not in everyone's allowance to pay extra for tuition classes. The sample was unsure of how long even she could afford that. Also, in my opinion, tuition classes are a failure of educators and to an extent, the education system.

The study also suggests that families with more than two children generally suffer due to lack of devices and limited internet within which every child juggle as apps like Zoom meet, Google meet etc consume a lot of bandwidth. A pack of 1 GB or 1.5 GB a day could hardly be sustained for a day. This does not allow a student to self-learn and researches more about the topics discussed in the curriculum. In a way, this kills

³UNESCO, 2020 issue note n.2.1: Distance learning strategies in response to COVID-19 school closures.

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373305>

⁴UNESCO's synthesis report: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/synthesis_report_future_of_education_webnair_1.pdf

⁵Learning management system <https://www.paycor.com/resource-center/hr-glossary/lms-meaning/>

the curiosity factor in a child which is one of the essential elements in learning. Moreover, Internet service providers have consistently increased the prices of their data plans that it is not in the affordance of a person who is earning minimum wages and is not financially backed up. In such circumstances, the epidemic has highlighted long-standing connection gaps and has heightened the urgency with which they must be addressed. To enhance learning for all, we must bridge the digital divide.

The education standards were maintained by private educational institutions but small-scale local schools and colleges could not cope up with online technologies and their usage. Another sample of the research was an eleven-year-old boy who did not go to his school for the past 2 years but is promoted without any classes or examinations. He told, *"I will help my father on construction sites because I do not understand the school studies nor do I have any interest in that. But a part of fees has to be given every month."*

Due to the New Education Policy (NEP), the schools aren't allowed to fail any student till class 8th, this gives an easy way to the public and private institutions to promote students even without examinations. When asked about his further educational plans, he told, *"I do not understand any subject. Neither my parents can help as they never went to school. Even if I want to continue the school after 8th standard, I will fail in exams."* The sample showcases his insincerity for schooling and the continuation of his studies. And there will be many like him who would discontinue the education because of a lack of understanding and proper direction and mentoring. This is not a healthy trend for the economy and human resource management of the country.

With schooling being shifted to the digital classrooms, a sense of responsibility and attentiveness was lost. Behind the screens, children laughed, ate meals etc during the classes. As per the primary data collection, Glitch in the microphone and video camera became an unsolicited genuine excuse of students to avoid the teacher's punishment. This resulted in the loss of understanding and concentration of students. Education was taken for granted as students did not pay attention to the classes for exams were to be conducted either online or they would be prohibited. Again, Exams were also hampered, causing students' learning paths and progression to be disrupted. Online examinations or Open book examinations (OBE) gave plenty of leverage of copying and cheating to the students. This cannot be the parameter of a judgement of a student's knowledge. Similarly, it also affected the evaluation process as assessing answer sheets in the form of online documents was new and exhausting for the teachers. Moreover, the virtual medium ensured a systematic impartation of theoretical knowledge but somewhere lacked the essence of practical approach for streams like engineering, doctorate, media and communication etc where lab application is a must to get a varied overview and perspective of practical field. Such concepts and studies suffered due to restrictions on the offline mode of educative communication.

Conclusion

The pandemic times witnessed a lot of chaos even when no physical movement was allowed. The education sector of the economy took a revolutionary turn where the entire teaching methodology was revised. The completion of curriculum, submissions, evaluations etc was now done virtually on online platforms such as Zoom Meetings, google meet etc. The support of the technology and new media backed the entire sector from collapsing as the studies and training of the students was not kept on hold but was rather enhanced with the virtual platform. The platform gave numerous opportunities not just to students but also to the learners irrespective of age or profession to pick online courses and learn art, science, or technology in times of lockdown. But at the same hand, the existence of the digital divide is a major issue acting as a hindrance in the growth of everyone irrespective of their economic conditions, minority aspect and marginalisation towards communities. The divide has caused the non-accessibility of technology in the hands of certain sections of society who has massively suffered from their education in the past couple of years, which would have adverse effects on their future education. The lack of availability of technology i.e., mobile phone and laptops and insufficient Internet has stood as the major challenge for the unprivileged and the ones surviving in social prejudices. Just as any revolution has both positive and negative effects on the economy, education being taught on virtual mediums has its parameters. But the need of the hour is reform. By reforms only, the society can be uplifted and development could be channelised in the correct direction which would give equal opportunities and resources to the learners. Spending crores on advertisements has surely ensured to spread the importance and necessity of education amongst millions but for the same, the government has to ensure the equal divide and availability of resources and technologies in urban, rural, tribal and remote areas. The Government should take it as its prime responsibility to fill in the gap because the new media is the future and the future can only be sustained by education and learning.

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