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The Un-present Presence – A Sociological Analysis of Online Classes in Covid Era

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Introduction

A day will reckon in when learning goes back again to the household as in the Gurukula age when students learn from within the comfort of their homes and from the resort of their own spaces again. In fact none expected this to happen especially when learning has become a truly international process where globalization has unleashed an array of options both in India and abroad which gave us access to the new milieu of education far and wide.

The concept of education got revolutionized and realigned in tune with the aspirations of an emerging social order which was truly internationally recognized and got many and multifaceted dimensions of which online learning was a part and parcel of the larger entity. In 2020, the onset of a pandemic (now even a disease has an international dimension) transformed and rearticulated everything and almost everyone including the very process of how and where we receive and give education.

The traditional educational scenario which was classroom based and purely teacher centered with all its multiple ramifications got a shock right from the onset of this worldwide pandemic which has become nothing but a pandemonium in the real sense of the term. This shock and awe was soon replaced by a sense of realization that we are badly in need of an adaptation process without which we cant deliver or ensure the educational transformation of our children which is impossible provided we follow the routine classroom sessions.

This juncture made us realize the need for digital learning and web based technology which can definitely help us during this moment of such unparalleled crisis . The beginning of routine online sessions was a response to this emergency and initially it was welcomed with suspicion and a state of ordeal confusion especially from the side of skeptics who mistook this as an alternative to classroom sessions. Very slowly, online mode became the normal mode and this mode of learning became accepted though with some hesitation hoping that it will be got over or done away with say in another three to six months or more once the pandemic is over.

The successful conduct of classes and the gradual development in student enrollment and better attendance potential slowly silenced the skeptics and enhanced the reliance on online sessions as a better and safer alternative to classroom sessions and as a perfect teacher centered approach which can substantially improve student achievement especially in the long run. Successful conduct of webinars and international symposiums using the same online mode (via Google meet , Webex and Zoom platforms) increased this confidence and transformed online learning into the 'new normal'.

Thus our student teacher community has become what is known as a virtual community in the real sense of the term and they had adapted themselves to this new mode of online teaching learning process within a very short span of time. The entire syllabus and modicum of the curriculum is now delivered online with complete absence of any offline operations. This definitely was a revolutionary step especially in the case of science subjects which needed physical presence of students in many forms. The successful conduct of exams using this mode further enhanced its reliability and long term dependency as a perfect alternative to classroom sessions. Gradually online mode has become the regular mode and almost an accepted mode of classes with complete absence of interaction in almost any other platforms except via the 'meet platforms'.

Virtual classrooms – Boon or Bane

An obvious question is raised here regarding the multidimensional benefits and advantages of online classes especially when the entire globe is deeply divided and distanced by a pandemic and when literally coming together is impossible almost for an year from now and more. The primary and firsthand experience is definitely positive and boonful as almost the whole gamut of education related pursuits has become voluminously online and could be easily accessible by students located in different parts of the world by maintaining enough social distance and adequate access to knowledge bases that can be made available to them without any difficulty. The parallel development of moodle and similar platforms all the more relaxed the task and made it pertinently easier and far more effective especially related to the delivery of syllabi and enactment of the curriculum.

Despite the physical presence and college or school based activities which now never happen except online, this mode and its functioning drastically reduced the time, energy and cost in catering and delivering education and traversed across time and space almost universally.

These boons are certainly commendable and highly effectual in the present scenario and they did give a rationale to the ongoing mode of education but a look at its defects and an understanding of its underlying nature has also to be made very comprehensively without which the analysis would be incomplete and incompetent in its representation.

The Missing Student Syndrome

I would rather designate it as 'missing child syndrome' because of the absentee presence of the student in relation with the online sessions which could ensure their attendance but certainly not their presence in the online classroom. An online classroom is a virtual scenario where the teacher delivers his / her sessions expecting full attendance and participation from the pupil which he ensures through their online phone presence which indicates their physical and mental presence in the session. But in reality this is the other way round. The proliferation of technology and gadgets help them progressively to ensure their nominal presence in the online classroom and at the same time they can browse through a multitude of websites, applications and portals without being caught and noticed. This ever present anonymity gives them a potential edge over normal classroom sessions which they often utilize to their advantage.

Jean Baudrillard in his analysis of capitalism speaks about simulation society which is nothing but an imagery which represents the reality. Here words are used in relation to other words but never to reality. These simulations ultimately leads to what is known as a hyper reality which is nothing but a gigantic simulation. In internet based online educational platforms too a gigantic simulation is being used to explain or represent the reality, but it has nothing to do with the real or the entity about which the educator is speaking about. In such a historical context, the student is mesmerized by the effect of this hyper reality but at the same time could barely connect himself/herself with the full meaning of a realistic experience.

Once online education took the center stage, it also necessitated the inclusion of online devices like the smartphones, laptops and other devices which acted like keys to open the unknown discourse of knowledge. This made it an imperative for the student community to afford to buy such devices without which participation in online classes was impossible. This obviously created what is known as a technological bifurcation or truncation between the digitally equipped and the digitally unequipped in the real sense of the term as a reality. Some could afford for these gadgets and some couldn't and the latter may get marginalized very easily. So the poor - rich distinction which once existed in our classrooms slowly permeated into our online platforms too which entrenched itself from within the system in many forms. This is what Pippa Noris designate as the 'digital divide' that divided mankind into technologically accessible and accountable and those who are technologically non-accessible and non accountable. Our online virtual classrooms also became a platform for slowly deepening this cleavage though in-deliberately.

Another grave problem is the very introduction of smartphones at a very tender age say by the age of 5 or 6 and the rapid and continuous usage of the device for attending classes. An independent research conducted by American Clinical Association hints the rapid growth of smartphone related illnesses in pupils especially at the age bracket of 5-10 including tumors of eyes and brain, nervous disorders, eye related disorders due to exposure to blue light emitted from the smartphones, skin burns, sleep disorders, problems with concentration, psychological issues especially withdrawal symptoms and many similar conditions.

Psychological Effects – Baneful Aftershocks

The taking over of online sessions and almost complete absence of offline or class based sessions create a different atmosphere and psychological experience for the student community at large. Instead of sitting in the class and listening, they befriend the smartphone and eventually the gadget becomes an inevitable part of their lives. This may create a strong relationship and dependency on the smartphone almost every now and then and almost for everything. Studies conducted by the Savitribhai Phule Pune University (SPPU) among college students testifies this fact. Almost 80 % of the respondents admitted that they can't live without the gadget and has a tendency to check it once in every 25 minutes irrespective of the fact that someone messaged/ called them or not. Another shocking revelation was made by 34% students who agreed that they kept aloof from online classes despite logging in and use to visit porn and shopping sites in the guise of attending classes. 10% revealed that they experienced violent psychic vibration if they were not permitted to use their smartphones.

Jacques Derrida attempts to find out how the meanings of texts can be plural and unstable and hidden in terms of assumptions explained in the form of signs to the reader. In the era of online education it is seriously doubtful that whether this form of discursion and deconstruction can be done by the pupil who is glued to a screen which is incapable in giving him/her multiple explanations and expressions of a social reality. Instead of this, he / she is forced to consume what is known as a basic and single meaning of things which is always monotonous and lopsided. Previously the student could himself engage in what is known as a critical reading of different texts which can be plural and equally discontinuous and therefore he could deconstruct his own reality which may be fragmented, incoherent and plural in character. This seriously hampers and reverses his/her imaginative capacity and analytical ability and develops slavish subservient approach to the teacher and to the discourse.

All assessments and available evidences indicate that despite the claims about the effectuality of online classes there are many grey areas which remain unaddressed and almost unattended by the academic

community at large. The normalization and social acceptance of online classes is nothing but a farce and it would eventually create education without a face and soul.

Concluding Observations

Virtual world irrespective of how it is made to be real has its limitations and those limitations will definitely overshadow its advantages whatever they are. The academic enterprise has a personalized touch and self evident humanness that is almost missing or nominally present in the online classroom scene. So accepting it as an alternative is a self defeatist idea not only for students, but for educators and for all stakeholders including parents. The real question lies in whether we could work out a solution to these pertinent issues and whether we could move back slowly to classes provided online sessions remain as a viable option and not an alternative.

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