

Marketing the Online Education to Tier 2, 3, and 4 Cities Educational stakeholders

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Abstract : The issue of 'online education' had been gaining tremendous traction in that last few years among the educational stakeholders, alsike however the COvid-19, changed all that and provide a unmissable catalytic push to the adoption of the same across the educational landscape. This sudden change, no doubt welcome, also offers considerable learning opportunities for the relevant enablers and participants in the teaching-learning process.

This paper dwells on addressing the relevant issues pertaining to 'marketing of the above concept' to the Management/Promoters of educational institutions in the Tier 2, 3, and 4 cities of (Northern) India. The schools in focus are the Primary and Secondary education providing schools in Northern India. The aim here is the initiate ground –up discussions on concrete issues; and thereby offer great insights into marketing the 'Online Education' to the aforementioned class, which may or may not be that clued into the technological upheaval in landscape of education.

Keywords: *ICT; Online education; social media; and assessment methods.*

I. THE BACKGROUND:

The onset of Spring-2020 brought many things to this world – the outbreak of an unknown disease; unprecedented governmental reactions; a crisis induced people-to-people social media over action; and a forced disruption in almost all social activities, including education. And it is the latter that is the focus of the present work.

By the time the Summer of 2020 set-in, the disruption to the field of education was complete, with most societies, and nations, being forced to close schools and similar institutions due the Covid19 outbreak. The discussion on 'Online Education/ Digital delivery of education' had been around for some time now.

II. THE CONCEPT:

We will all agree that teaching through a distance mode is not a new idea, so why is that 'teaching online' gets more attention than the former? Is it really any different or it's just the case of old wine in a new bottle? For the purpose of this paper we take the working definition as 'conducting a course partially or entirely through the internet— either on the Web or by way of mobile apps that allow one to manipulate the online course elements". It is then that we would have to Online education as electronic learning- as a form of distance education, a process that traditionally included courses taught through the mail, by contemporary digital medium. Any form of learning that doesn't involve the traditional classroom setting in which students and instructor may or may not be in the same physical settings. This would also include intermittent and continuous interaction windows available to the class to further engage with the instructor and would also incorporate the use of digital tools and techniques (both proprietary and open sources created).

In the present pandemic induced Online Education adoption it would cover the use of Zoom, Google-Meet, and Microsoft Meeting enabled classes/instruction sessions being offered to students in India. The present

adoption is also witnessing a supporting role being played by instant messaging apps like WhatsApp, and Telegram, and the various social networking platforms. The distinct features for this scenario is the use of flexible courseware, co-created content, and heightened interactivity.

The aims of the present Online education were best summed up by Finkelstein (2006):

- a) Immediate and just-in-time access to peers, and instructors,
- b) The ability for multiple people to interact and share ideas with one another concurrently
- c) Hands-on tools through which learners can react to presented concepts or apply knowledge in real time
- d) Direct connections to real-world situations and primary resources
- e) The means to demonstrate and assess real-time skills and analytical thinking

III. THE FOCUS AREA:

This work focuses on primary and secondary schools in the aided and private educational space in the Northern States of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, only.

IV. METHODOLOGY:

The data for this work was collected through the qualitative methods, - primary data was collected through a semi-structured schedule administered through digital interface with 13 educators (including 5 principals) spread across 6 Tier 2,3, and 4 cities Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Theoretical sampling was utilized for this. The digital interactions through Internet enabled communications tools were conducted, and to gather their experiences on the given theme.

This study used qualitative approach inspired from the Grounded theory methodology. A schedule was designed and used to conduct interviews, however the researcher also utilized follow-up questions, and sometimes, guiding questions, based on the earlier responses by the subjects, this was in line with the recommendations of Glaser (1978) and also Strauss & Corbin (1998) wherein the minor modification of questions (overtime) is accepted, as newer themes, concepts, categories may emerge from the data collection process.

For the recording of data through these interviews, the following were utilized- audio recordings were used whenever the respondent agreed to be recorded (such cases were very less) and in majority of cases the researcher made use of extensive notes and memos (Clarke, 2005) to record the concepts, ideas, opinions, responses from the subjects.

Each interview was transcribed through manual recording of data immediately after the interview, so as to reduce any bias or omission from operating with a delay.

One of the major issues of contention in the qualitative data works is the clarity which is sought on how the researcher has arrived at the conclusions- both intermediate and final. For this work the Bryman (1994) approach was used. The textual data recorded during the interviews was transcribed and then a content analysis was carried out to arrive at the two steps towards categorization and crystallization of the ideas/themes

In order to establish the clarity of protocols used in recording, studying, writing, and analyzing the interaction data relevant for this work. Once again the grounded theory approach's – guidance on the stages of categorization and coding – were adopted. It is imperative that these two steps be done with absolute care as the subsequent comparisons and interpretation of the data so collected would be contingent on this. This becomes even more critical when the data is mainly textual and interviews based.

V. EMERGENT ISSUES:

(a) **Unpreparedness of the Promoters/Managements:** The discussion on 'Online education' had been on the tables of these schools for quite some time but the usual delay were seen as normal, due to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the managements regarding the new adoption of these tools. The other issues of unpreparedness were driven by the lack of the appropriate infrastructure in schools, and with the existing skillsets of the Faculty (?). The fact that the online education 'is/was going to be the future' was not embraced by the managements, especially in the Tier 2,3, and 4 cities, as these innovation/initiatives were sought to be – 'appropriate for the urban centers/Tier 1 cities only' - in their eyes.

The promoters many a times were found lacking in the grasping the near metamorphosis that the 'online education' would/could bring to the table- rather they were looking at the new initiatives and being a short term addition, rather the 'next urban educational fad'which might slowly fade out.

(b) **Implementation Issues:** Most School Managements are resorting to the sharing of 'implementation obstacles' when being asked/forced to adopt the 'online education provision' during the pandemic period. These obstacles range from – lack of universal on-boarding of the boards/ faculty; to redesigning the curriculum; to redesigning the assessment methods; and to understanding the learning requirements, process in the new setup. Most subjects agreed that the school lacked the 'change agents' or access to qualified 'instructional designers' who could help them in tiding over this transition. The subjects opined that the transition planning would remain the core if the promoters/schools were serious in reaping the benefits of the new reality.

(c) **Available ICT Infrastructure:** Most schools are suffering from the lack of ICT infrastructure at both supply and consumption ends – this was concluded by almost all subjects. The Subjects were also quick to accept that most schools were in fact trying to upgrade their ICT infrastructure, even during the pandemic. However these efforts were inadequate as the centralized planning required to establish the ICT basics, was lacking here. The most schools had to rely on (their) website managers/designers who in spite of their best intent were not having the adequate 'instructional design' backgrounds to guide them. Simply designing a platform for a digital learning is not enough, as the delivery, learning, collaboration, and assessment all would be moving to a 'digital enable environment' and this setup would require high degree of interoperability of tools and techniques to achieve success. Thus the School promoters would be better pressed to seek help from domain experts while rebuilding their ICT infrastructure.

(d) **Transition Costs:** Most subjects were of the opinion that schools often tend to look at short-term transition costs required for this implementation and are still looking at the 'newer initiatives' as an 'extended fad' which is just being forced by the governmental pressures, just to tide over the pandemic

period. They also under the impression that once the ‘normalcy’ is restored the parents, pupils, and the even the government would revert to the pre-covid status on school operations, as the disparity on costing would then become visible to all these stakeholders.

Another point highlighted by the subjects was the lack of clarity on the costing- esp. when the present conditions are dictating the adoption of free-source platforms, and tools by the regulators. The promoters are finding it difficult to rationalize the ownership of similar tools and techniques (including enablers) when the intended role for it, is not so clear.

Another view which exists is that the online initiative can at best be seen in a supplementary role, wherein disruptions can call for its rollout, and thus the schools would be cautious in incurring significant investments into it.

(e) **Recovering the investments:** Most subjects agreed that the promoters are worried on the ‘realisation of investment’ issues especially when the pandemic has affected the ‘regular fees’ realization. The numerous new expenses are often viewed with serious scepticism as to how these would be realised. This is truer, for the unaided/private schools, which have no Govt aid to look forward to, for assistance. We must accept that even though the education in India is a ‘non-profit’ domain, the trusts and societies running these schools do look for realizations over and above the books – a truth which is known to all but seldom written about. The moment the school managements see the difficulty of being (un)able to easily pass the additional investments to the paying parents, - this become a significant stumbling block, as the boards usually use this plank to rundown the transition.

(f) **Training requirements:** As has been already established by earlier researchers, the training or reorientation of the teachers, and pupils both hold significant position in ensuring the success of such initiatives, - evidenced by Singh (2016); and Boettcher (2016) – wherein both the works establish the reorientation in the role of the teachers, to a ‘new found facilitator form’, who is now a more of an enabler role in the digitalized world of teaching. The same goes for the pupils, who if not trained properly would find difficulties in smoothly function in the digital landscape. The subjects were of the opinion that the training aspects were less or sometimes non-existent (except, in a few cases) as the pandemic hastened the move towards this e-adoption, and that this was having significant impacts on teachers, especially the ones, with low tech-friendly nature. They also agreed that adjusting to a facilitator model - also requires a change of mind-set which they were slowly adopting too.

Most subjects shared that very schools which showed openness towards the new digital experiences, where also sometimes exhibited their preferences towards the more ‘control & monitoring’ aspects, while being indifferent to the ‘collaborative and open learning environment’. This in their (i.e the subject’s views) – created an ‘uneasy operational vision’ which was definitely an impediment.

The subjects also opined that a small number of schools had offered/conducted appropriate training for the faculties as yet, and the training sessions for the pupils were hardly heard off in the given settings, and this has had, a limiting role in the whole exercise during the pandemic.

(g) **Engagement with Newer partners:** This new form of teaching also brings about the opportunities to engage with newer partners, - be it the technology tools designers; application creators; and/or technology

platform operators. This creates a newer paradigm for many schools wherein they are now being nudged to engage with 3rd party players, whose organization, operational culture, and requirements are quite unique for these school promoters'. The engagement forms also offer an entirely new form- example the assessment solutions are both subscription based, and one-time buy, based with varying degrees of support. The opportunity to customise the solution is also open to negotiations and to the shared vision between such partnerships.

Quite a few Promoters/Schools have never had to engage with such 3rd party players earlier and they find it quite a challenge, and this was identified by a reasonable number of the subjects.

(h) **Addressing the Domain differences:** The subjects were divided on how the promoters/managements were assessing the impacts of digital education, in the field of study- i.e. Arts, Science, & Commerce. They felt that there exists a notion subscribed to by a reasonable number of promoters, that while pure science teaching was 'easy to be taken to a newer format'- there were domain specific limitations with pure social sciences /humanities teaching being offered in the newer formats. This in their (i.e in the minds of the promoters) was built on the conventional interaction in traditional classes, - which would extent to this new medium also; plus a small number of promoters also believe that certain subjects like 'literature' etc. would be especially difficult to teach in the virtual settings.

(i) **Lack of clarity on Assessment methods:** Most schools are finding it difficult to zero-down on appropriate assessment tools, in this new setup. They are using a hybrid model of testing/assessment which have significant lacunas. The school managements are struggling with multiple 3rd party players offering readymade, proprietary assessment tools- but many such tools are devoid of a grass root-connect, as they have had limited rollouts (and the sellers have suddenly hit pay-dirt with the pandemic hastening the adoption). Not all Managements are prepared to negotiate and visualize the assessment needs on today and tomorrow. And that has offered them a readymade obstacle which managing the 'digital education' transition.

(j) **Content Ownership and Management Issues:** Most subjects interviewed for this work were found to be quite unaware about the ownership and usage of e-Content in this new setup. Most admitted to using a mix of self-generated, and 3rd party content (including propriety content) without much attention. Most had no idea on the ownership of self-created content on the schools platform (if any) and almost all didn't know how Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) issues would apply to collaborative content creation process (both on the schools' owned; and on third-party platforms). The issue of plagiarism would now have to be addressed at school levels, as not all material would be available free, and any 3rd party content would require proper acknowledgement and would have to be used in a accepted legal manner. The School management in their opinion were equally clueless on the above.

(k) **Issues related to Teachers Autonomy and Appraisals:** The next issue which emerged out was the lack of clarity prevailing among the subjects about their perceived autonomy in the newer setup. They were of the opinion that as the newer environment offered unlimited innovation potential the autonomy limits also need to be relooked at, in the light of new realities of the operating field. And the same sentiment was shared on the issue of the 'assessment of the teachers' in the new setup. The subjects expressed their views

that there existed a lack of coherent vision on the aforementioned topics and that the promoters would have to address them soon, or latter, in order to truly realize the potential of the digital education.

The next issue emerging from the faculty's side was the re-orientation of the 'work-life balance' which has been great and adversely affected in this new setup. They expressed their reservation if this 'new normal' would continue and their 'work-life balance' would remain altered forever. The issue of recruitment getting affected by this new setup was also brought about by a few subjects, esp. the Principals- who were of the opinion that henceforth a 'digital teaching~friendliness' would become an entry level qualification for teachers.

(1) **The interaction of the Parents:** The Digital delivery of education has also brought about a newer reality of parental interaction, which was somewhat limited in the traditional setup. This would require a fresh set of protocols to handle at the school levels, as such interaction would continue to growth- both in numbers and in richness.- thereby forcing the educators to address it. Most subjects interviewed for this work, denied any knowledge of their (or any other nearby) School Managements being aware or acting on such stimulus. When the subjects were quizzed over any efforts to 'co-opt' the parents into this system (from the schools side) – the stand was decidedly negative. In fact most subjects were unaware on how this 'co-opting' initiative may work? ; And also if it was worth the effort as the overwhelming the schools were taking this increased parent interaction as a 'negative by-product' of the new system.

VI. POSSIBLE MARKETING GOALPOSTS:

In conclusion the research would like to recommend the following to anyone who seeks to engage (on this issue) with the Educational Stakeholders in the given settings:

1. Target the Management Buy-in by tying in the Organization's Overall Aims with the Solutions being offered (i.e the Digital education initiatives). Any failure to establish the above always creates a gap, which further hampers the collaboration process.
2. Contextualizing the initiatives by highlighting the concrete/tangible benefits arising out of the adoption of the new platforms
3. Focusing on the tangible benefits related to learning objectives and the advancements in assessment formats
4. Establishing the hand-holding window to assist the Schools Promoters in trying out newer modules and formats.
5. Offering insights into the evolving landscape of the domain, and how the present solution could tie-into the further scenarios.
6. Always co-opt the stakeholders into the process. Any failure to achieve this would derail the entire exercise.

VII. LIMITATIONS:

The present work does not cover the following issues:

- (i) Impacts of Digital education for pupils with special needs

- (ii) Privacy concerns of both the teachers and the pupils
- (iii) Commercial applications (Apps) and Platforms offering supplementary educational services through the digital forms.
- (iv) Work-Life Balance for the participants
- (v) Digital Lifestyle teaching.
- and
- (vi) The work is limited to two northern states only

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