



Digital Learning in pandemic (Covid-19)

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Abstract : The sudden outbreak of a deadly disease, Covid-19 pandemic caused by a Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) shook the entire world. Stay away, maintain social distancing is the mantra these days in the corona-induced issues. It had a far-reaching impact in every field. Education system was challenged across the world forcing educators and learners to shift to online learning and becoming tech-savvy almost overnight. It involved the ability to use a computer or mobile connected to a network, that offers unparalleled flexibility. Transition was way more difficult and almost impossible especially for the developing countries. Digital learning had been in practice for some time supplementing traditional face to face classroom learning at certain institutions. But to shift entirely to online teaching-learning or stop education temporarily till this crisis ends left no option but to change their traditional pedagogy inspite of the reluctance. A changing education was imperative and can clearly show the paradigm shift from traditional modes. New technologies and online platforms can be called a panacea for this crisis due to its capability to disseminate knowledge to a wide demographic. This paper intends to find its impact on the education system- advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and challenges in time of crisis both from the perspective of the student as well as educators. The methodology applied will be referring to secondary sources.

Keywords: Covid-19, education, digital learning, technology.

Introduction

The advent of new technologies had already started influencing education as it has in other spheres. The education system turned upside down almost overnight changing from traditional face to face learning to online learning throughout the world from primary level to higher education. The unprecedented situation caused by the Coronavirus pandemic has led to research on its impact on education, learners and educators. Computers and mobile with internet facilities was the only primary requirement to bring knowledge at the click of a mouse or tap on a screen. Readily available free as well as paid software which served the purpose were Zoom, Google Meet, WebEx, Microsoft Teams etc. The transition for the educators and the learners was quite difficult neither being tech-savvy to adjust to abrupt changes, especially in developing countries which lacked basic infrastructure.

Paradigm shift in Covid-19

The paradigm shift forced learning pedagogy to completely new norm which was exclusively online teaching and learning. Social distancing and infection rate can be cited as reasons for this change in most institutions except for a few which already used it to supplement traditional learning.

To realize the new normal, a mixture of collaborative tools and engaging methods must be used in a proper structure to promote "inclusion, personalization and intelligence", according to Dowson Tong, Senior Executive Vice President of Tencent and President of its Cloud and Smart Industries Group. To maximise the effects of online learning, we need to go beyond just replicating traditional, physical classes using video conferences or calls.

The book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, by scholar Yuval Noah Harari showcased how schools traditionally still focus on rote learning and memorization instead of skills relevant in future with emphasis on thinking critically as well as an adapting nature.

Online learning provides flexibility, accessibility, focus on students, collaboration, time and energy savings as it eliminates commute, also at times improved interaction with students when supported by asynchronous and synchronous tools such as e-mail, WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram chats. Knowledge reaches to a large group in a fraction of seconds when e-content or link of the lectures are provided, eliminating the barriers of space and time thus allowing the students to learn in their own rhythm. (Arkorf and Abaidoo 397-410) The process can thus be adapted according to the learner's needs and enhance the objectives of learning. While studying the perception of students and teachers about online learning, Al-Dosari found that inspite of many benefits, participants considered accessibility to be the most significant. (Al-Dosari 391-407)

Some critics however consider online learning has large negative impacts also. Though it's the only option during Covidian times for education system to function, it poses infinite challenges and some downsides of it can also be identified. The primary requirements for the online classes were the availability of reliable internet connection and adequate digital devices at either end. Developing countries like India especially lacked these, which has a predominantly low-income and a large rural population. The institutions primarily use free-services to conduct classes in place of paid solutions due to financial constraints, which are time limited to regulate load on supporting infrastructure.

Moreover, the inadequacy of the educators and learners towards usage of technology was significant. The study by School Education Gateway showed that 66.9% of teachers acknowledged teaching on online platforms was entirely new to them. Apart from these several other obstacles surfaced too. Online learners easily got distracted, lost focus, or missed deadlines. Spending long hours on mobile/computer affected the eyes as well as their mental health and also caused back problems along with reduced outdoor activity. Isolation and alienation due to lack of physical interaction with instructors as well as peers also led to health issues and decreased motivation in students. Since our internet system is unable to bear the load and hold so many concurrent video calls, the majority of participants are forced to keep their cameras off, reducing internet usage. Delayed or denied help from the teachers, technical issues arising due to server overloading often caused unclear sound, signal loss which led to interruptions during classes and slowed the learning process. Educators also had issues due to lack of responses and interactive two-way communication in classes which caused frustration. The boundary between their homes and offices/classroom was blurred leading to intermixing of disturbances from both domains.

Overcoming these issues need experience, knowledge, adaptation and familiarization on the part of both, since neither was ready for such abrupt changes overnight. Extra communication channels need to be established by the teachers to reach out to students. As online learning depends on mediated communications, incremental growth through interactions was rarely possible which forms the backbone of traditional teaching and supplements official curriculum. This would reduce isolation among students. Effective techniques to make it interactive and learning based on discovery and experience should be provided. Moreover, usage of friendly tools providing reliable, interactive and diverse electronic resources, that help students assimilate and understand information are a must. So, it can be used as an opportunity and shift from the teacher/subject-matter focussed to student/skill-focussed educational methods because their skill is an indicator of successful learning in either online or offline mode. To explore the full potential of online learning technology is incumbent upon all of us as it is playing the role of a saviour during the present scenario. Student's as well as teacher's perception regarding online learning could gradually become more positive and acceptable.

When online learning is used as a supplement to traditional face to face learning, it greatly enhanced student's learning, assimilation of knowledge and their engagement with lectures as pointed by another study. (Lochner et al. 69-74) When a research was conducted to compare traditional and online learning a higher percentage preferred the former stating that they assimilated more information in face to face classes than online. However, the students had a positively perceived overall online learning experience inspite of the difficulties encountered. (Alsaaty et al. 31) Though the students would any day prefer tradition face-to-face learning than online because it doesn't provide same learning impact. (Galy et al. 209-230) But learners as well as educators supported blended learning which would be a combination of the two and is already popular in some institutions, rather than exclusively online learning which has been forced in contrast to traditional pedagogy due to Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that this pandemic has utterly disrupted an education system that many asserts was already losing its relevance.

Wang Tao, Vice President of Tencent Cloud and Vice President of Tencent Education said "I believe that the integration of information technology in education will be further accelerated and that online education will eventually become an integral component of school education."

Conclusion

We can draw the conclusion that though online learning appears to be the panacea during the present Covid-19 pandemic it still faces lot of hurdles. It has disrupted the traditional face to face learning, forcing the pedagogical change. It's acceptance as the exclusive mode of education in the future still needs time. Though the students at times finds online learning easier to assimilate knowledge, it creates lot of hurdles with its monotonous nature creating alienation and serious health issues. Moreover, the lack of basic infrastructure is also a grave challenge for academia especially in developing country like India with low financial status and huge rural population. After more than a year of pandemic, significant improvement has been seen with experience, knowledge, adaptation and familiarization. Paradigm shift forced learning pedagogy to completely new norms. Educators and learners simultaneous have taken a leap forward, becoming tech-savvy and showing adaptive instincts. This pandemic showcases the role played by online learning in disseminating knowledge across space and time, stressing on a changing education mode being imperative. So, we can say that online learning can have lot of implications on the future learning methodology and a new hybrid model of education might emerge, with significant benefits.

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