Is 'E- Learning' a Sustainable Solution to COVID-19 Induced Education Crisis in India?

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ABSTRACT

Education is like food rich in various nutrients required to keep the mind healthy. From *'gurukul'* to *'digi-kul'* education, especially professional education has evolved tremendously in the last decade. This journey has traversed paths intermittent with 'open air' learning to customize learning, from blackboard-based learning to technology based learning. Though smart boards and computers were being increasingly used in classroom-based teaching in the recent past, no one had imagined a scenario where institutions would be devoid of students and teachers, while attendance would be marked in a virtual classroom. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us to adapt to a new normal, so after an initial break of two to three months people got back to business in new ways. 'Comeback' was the answer to 'setback'. But is this 'new normal' inclusive? Have we left behind a vulnerable yet very important segment of our population? If education means imparting knowledge, teaching and training young minds, is E-learning reaching and influencing young minds? This paper attempts to present the authors' views on this subject.

Keywords: E-learning, education crisis, non-inclusive

INTRODUCTION

Education has been since time immemorial recognized as an indispensable tool in the armor of a person's development tool kit. The importance of correct education can never be over emphasized. The education system in India and world over has evolved from time to time to keep pace with the changing times and changed needs of the industry and economy.

A few decades back India was just warming up to the idea of e-learning as a potential means of teaching learning for the future. Different techno driven tools such as smart boards, PPTs with animation and audio, mobile based applications etc were options we hoped to incorporate in our teaching pedagogy. But 2020 shook us up or rather it hit us like a resounding slap pasted on an innocent child's cheeks by a furious teacher!!

For ages to come we will remember 2020 as the year of 'corona'- a tiny virus that forced shut our world. Educators realized that it's time to act, time to go virtual totally at least until face to face interaction with students becomes a possibility again.

As we plod through the 'Zoom', 'Cisco WebEx' 'Google meet' or 'Go to meeting' virtual class and assign pages of assignments through 'Edmodo' or 'Google classroom' and take tests through 'Socrative', 'Testmoz' and other similar testing apps….the underlying question remains; *'are we doing justice to the students?*

Review of literature

World Economic forum (2020) in its report published online in April 2020 reported "Worldwide there are currently more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries affected by school closures due to the pandemic".

Though BYJYU's (India), Tencent classroom (China), Lark (Singapore) are chipping in with free online learning platforms, yet several thousand students across Asia remain unreachable.

The move to online learning has been unplanned-with no training, insufficient bandwidth, and little preparation. The result is a poor user experience that is not conducive to sustained growth.

Dhawan S. (June 2020) in her research article titled 'Online Learning: A Panacea in the Time of COVID-19 Crisis' writes "The participation by students is not enough, educators must put considerable effort to increase student engagement, retain their attention, take feedbacks, and assess them in several ways. This will create an effective and meaningful learning environment. EdTech cannot replace a teacher but it can enhance instruction".

According to Rieley (2020), "several educational institutions have stopped in-person teaching". COVID -19 has necessitated social distancing norms and other sanitation measures which may not be possible to incorporate by every institute. "Educational units are struggling to find options to deal with this challenging situation. These circumstances make us realize that scenario planning is an urgent need for academic institutions".

Objective

The sole objective of this article is to understand whether 'E-learning' is a viable option in times of crises and whether it can be taken up as a permanent feature in India in the near future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive. It tries to understand the importance of online learning in pandemics such as the Covid-19. The focus is also on identifying the key factors that hamper the concept of education for all, i.e. 'inclusive learning'.

This article is completely based on the secondary data. Secondary sources of data used are (a) journals, (b) reports, (c) search engines, (d) research papers, and other academic publications.

The Primary Issues

I. India is a country widely divided more on basis of class than caste, though in recent times the politicians have tried their best (and sadly succeeded also to a large extent) to divide the masses on basis of caste. The upper class and the upper middle class kids have access to unlimited data packs and are equipped with smart phones and good laptops. But a large section of those who struggle to pay the school/college fees of their wards cannot be expected to go digital. So do these children of lesser Gods suffer and lose out on education because of financial constraints?

Ms. Kshama Hastak, founder of Sarthak Foundation, a Lucknow (India) based NGO that provides education to slum kids, opined that as the world takes a quantum leap in education, there are several thousands of young bright minds who are bereft from education as they earn to eat and go hungry on days they do not earn anything. So though several NGOs like 'Sarthak Foundation' have started yellow rooms for such children, the pandemic has put a full stop in their onward journey. While their classmates move ahead to another academic year, the slum kids in absence of access to technology have gone back to farming or doing menial jobs to earn their daily bread.

II. A virtual class does not involve the learner, nor does it give the teacher a leverage to change the teaching style based on pupils' answers or reactions. Research shows that lecturing alone without discussion, debates and quizzing- is a skewed way of learning. A passive learner may learn only depending on his level of intellect. Most are likely to fall out of line. In a survey conducted by the researcher, 57% of P.G. (commerce) students said that it was difficult to follow what is being taught in a virtual class, while only 31% of under graduates (B.Com and BBA students) students replied in affirmative when asked if they could recall what was taught to them in the previous class! Though the teaching continues, but is the learning on too?

III. Another drawback of virtual learning is that practical subjects cannot be taught with the same effect as is done in physical format. Hands on learning which is the best way to learn is not possible in a virtual set up. 'Kinesics' an important wordless teaching tool, is missing in a Zoom class. A teacher's body language, gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, mood, punishment, pampering etc all contribute in enhancing learning, but these cannot be replicated in e- learning.

IV. Extracurricular activities, team spirit, development of a child's hidden skills, bonding with mates, learning to deal with competition through games, preparing team projects in the class etc are all major contributors in shaping a child's psyche. These cannot be used in E-learning.

V. Power cuts, connectivity issues, lethargy due to being constantly in home set up, teacher's inability to make effective use of digital tools are other factors that are a deterrent in making education totally digital.

CONCLUSION

Yes, agreed 'The show must go on', and while some teachers are taking baby steps as they foray in this new world 'classroom' others who are techno savvy are galloping ahead with confidence. But is the audience- our students- each one of them keeping pace with us? Do they actually understand the subjects being taught to them? The missing human touch, an environment bereft of friends and peers, and a world where the children stare blankly at a screen which is their only companion, the 'new world', what will be the impact of this and for how long will this affect the psyche of children?

Is E-learning a sustainable solution for India's COVID induced education crisis? I leave it for the readers to answer.

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