Research Article

COVID-19 AND THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT

Disasters and drastic changes due to natural calamities have, since ages, been an inseparable part of human lives on the planet. Why do these calamities befall, all of a sudden disturbing the normal smooth sailing, is a serious question to ponder? Recently the world was under siege due to the deadly Corona virus which brought life to a sudden and shocking halt. There was not a single nation which stood unaffected or was not deeply wounded by its gruesome impact. Those who have survived the 'Pandemic' have had their share of lesson. COVID-19 has drastically exposed inequalities round the globe and altered the way we communicate and work. Over the past two years, the world has witnessed a multifarious shift in human behaviour. When all of a sudden the schools closed down for safety reasons the connection between the teacher and the taught was abruptly snapped. With the uncertain lockdown it was the teachers only who kept on hitting the SOS tab dauntlessly in a bid to sail out safely from the chaos. Slowly yet steadily, it seems, the life has paced again. Keeping in mind the bitter fact that the threat of Corona has not yet evaded; I, through the paper, have striven to dwell on the extreme crisis it caused and the suggestions towards managing uninterrupted connectivity with the scholars in educational institutions round the nation during such adverse conditions. The motto being; 'the show must go on'.

INTRODUCTION

It was the year 'Two Thousand and Twenty' when the world was gripped by the lethal virus causing extreme panic and mayhem. It was an unknown enemy intruding and attacking the disarmed masses. There was panic on every face and every nation was struggling hard to find ways to fight back. Such nightmarish condition was seldom thought of. The paper focuses on the extreme conditions faced by our nation as well the entire world during Pandemic, a time when the human race was under restriction, threatened by the consequences of getting extinct. The world was and is still under a severe threat of Corona; a life-threatening virus which has already caused such havoc and disaster that many nations, in the past, had been compelled to observe a series of lockdowns in order to prevent themselves from its wrath. Amid closedowns and shutdowns, one thing that courageously fought back with a loud bang was none but the education world which thrived with enthusiasm working towards rejuvenating, regenerating and revitalising its scholars and professors by enlivening them with online activities, and striving to topsy-turvy the harrowing conditions to a normal like situation. In a planet ravaged and empowered by Corona virus, undoubtedly; online education has emerged as the 'New Normal' for over 300 million students across the world. While the virtual education has proven the best crisis management solution today, it's also a roadmap of the future.

Allow me to sneak into the past for a short while. It was August 2019 and I was teaching the students of B.A. previous an essay by Isaac Asimov prescribed in their course entitled '*The Fun They Had*'. The story fetches its readers into the year 2155, a future World where computers play a major role and teaching is performed by computer like robots with vast information stores. The protagonists of the story are two children. Tom, the older one, finds a real book in the attic and is deeply surprised by the object because the words on the page do not move like those on the screen of their '*mechanical teacher*'. The two kids are utterly dazed and mesmerised at the fact that such buildings named 'school' did exist where children reached in masses to study and have fun, Actually their life is just the opposite of what they discover. 'All the kids from the whole neighbourhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the classroom, going home together at the end of the day' (P.08). Asimov's short story proves a hit below the belt with the similar conditions speedily approaching us. In corona pandemic, something which seemed ridiculous and unimaginable has become a part of our lives. Did we ever, in our wildest of dreams, think of online classes? Or the condition where the teachers would become so helpless that they would

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resort to mechanical means for educating their children? But Yes, it's already here, and is going to stay longer, may be forever, a permanent and integral part of our survival. Owing to the twist in the scene of education in 2020, my fear has multiplied. Is it a declaration of a threat to our profession as teachers? Chalk and board have been replaced by hustle free online classes; will the teachers be conveniently replaced by human like robots as well? It's time to awaken. Corona pandemic and online classes have landed us on ground zero and compelled to work out some startling means of survival. In order to avoid the replacement the ultimate solution is acquiring computer expertise and becoming tech savvy.

Steps Involved in Smooth Conduction of Online Class

An online class is indeed the best option in such a diverse situation. Students sitting at home, in safer zones, can easily excess the teacher and be an active participant of the offline class. But there are certain hindrances and challenges that deeply affect the smooth conduction of such classes. Indian schools and colleges are the worst hit when it comes to implementing online classes due to the fact that all the institutions are not equipped with latest gazettes to counter the challenge smartly. With lesser amenities and low internet facility the problem has aggravated. After Lockdown, online teaching has proved a great challenge owing to the fact that the students hail from diverse economic backgrounds and hence all of them can't afford to have smart phones and laptops or even Tablets. In such a dire situation, keeping in mind the welfare of the students, it's essential to chalk out simpler ways in order to meet their requirements. The Government has efforted hard and quiet wisely distributed Smart Phones and Tablets to the aspiring students owing to the future requirement. But, this isn't enough...... Something else needs to be done to fathom successful achievement in the field of online classes.

To my knowledge and experience, the steps that can be initiated towards hurdle free online classes are-

- Educating the students to create their ids and collecting their email addresses and contact numbers to add them in a group on LMS/WhatsApp through which it can be convenient to conduct online classes as well as share e-content to the learners.
- Carefully and articulately designing a time table so that none of the subject is neglected and every topic can be dealt with appropriately.
- Arranging all the necessary equipments, devices and services, such as internet, laptop, camera, etc. and a host of people equipped with the ability to tackle technical snag, if any.
- Being prepared and ready with the readymade assignments to be shared after the online class.
- For the students who don't possess a Smart Phone or Laptop, deputing one or two students to help them by passing valid information about the online session, would enable a trouble-free sailing. This will not only reduce the work load but also save time.
- Giving proper breaks so that the students have time to think about the topic and frame their questions for probe, is a vital part of any successful teaching.
- One more thing which importantly has to be kept in mind is the allotment of time. We all know that it is the student who is going to be the worst sufferer by constantly glazing in to the screen for hours which would, of course, tell on the

health of his/her eyes. So, keeping the sessions shorter and impactful is the best remedy to sustain the interest.
- Asking a few open-ended questions related to the topic during the online session would make students more responsive and the class lively.
- It would also be mandatory to encourage students to put up their queries or clear doubts related to the topic and also to answer the questions asked by their peers.
- Setting up an online discussion forum permitting each one to participate would not only enable them to peak out of their shell but also provide them a platform for liberal expression.
- It is always advisable and healthy to take feedback from the students to learn their point of view about the session, which, in other sense, provides scope for improvement and enrichment.
- One more thing which should essentially be maintained during online class is to follow the principle of distancing from the learners for smooth and fumble free sailing. So, ensuring not to be too formal with the students so as to maintain the decorum.
- Strictly avoid postponing or cancelling of classes without any strong reason. It casts negative impression and losses efficacy, as well.

Benefits of Online Classes

Ever since Corona has set its pernicious foot, online class has gained momentum. The fact that it has manifold advantage cannot be negated, that's the sole reason why it is gaining speedy popularity round the globe. The certain perks attained are:

1. It can take place anywhere anytime, with minimal expenses without any botheration of time and place.
2. During a lecture, it's easy for the minds to wander. In many online classes the students can review instantly by rewinding the video/ audio/ transcript. The easy excess can not only widen their intellect but also enable multiple growths academically.
3. Many students aren't comfortable speaking in classroom environment. In online class, it can be much easier to share thoughts with others. They can easily drop their query in the chat box for a ready answer. Online education, thus, tends to foster better classroom participation.
4. In offline class a student has to respond immediately, whereas in an online class, students can spend as much time as they want to think about and hone their own ideas. This can lead to inculcating greater confidence and enthusiasm in the students.
5. Online education eliminates physical judgements that can cloud the rational discussion. During this class students don't have to worry about body language interfering with their deliverance.
6. Distance learning programs foster virtual communication and allow students to work with team members via email, chat rooms and other easy-to-use methods.
7. In online class students don't have to endure in-person lectures. Instead, they can digest it in pieces. In other words, a student can experience the first half of a lesson one day and the rest half the next day, conveniently. This can be helpful for those students who don't relish sitting at one place for a longer time.
8. Online class can, undoubtedly, prove expensive, but the student can save money by avoiding many fees typical of

education, including lab fees, commuting fees, parking fees, hostels etc. It's indeed fun living in a remote village and experiencing the college atmosphere of a metropolitan city.

9. Some students are home sick and online class would opportune them to study without leaving their safety zone. It is also safe for girls, as they can study any course without fretting about travelling.

10. Online classes can be held without the restriction of time or day. Our college generally conducts webinars on weekends after 3:00 pm.

11. Online class can also prove beneficial for the Govt. as it won't have to spend huge fund on raising educational institutions. Instead the money can be used towards improving the quality of online education, providing free mobiles and laptops to the students and working towards better internet facility in rural areas.

In recent years this form of education has evolved and is widely accepted. Attaining education, from ones comfort zone, was never so easily accessible. New learning models are constantly emerging on the market and giving students various ways to fashion their education into something that suits them. This also gives individuals a chance to complete a degree that they may have started and have not been able to continue for whatever reason. The future of online learning is exciting and opens education for a significant number of people. The change in the teaching system has proved a boon and its here with its firm footage to stay and flourish.

Problems in Online Dealing

Every coin has duel face, a negative and a positive. Online class, no doubt has multifarious benefits but its draw backs are too alarming to be ignored. Some of the bitter facts, pertaining to such classes that can mar its progress are

- Online class can be boring as it lacks classroom culture where the teacher and students can interact freely.
- Students as well as teachers often encounter technical difficulties. Electrical snag is common which could easily lead to the delay of any class causing inconvenience.
- Many times the pre-scheduled class leaves no space for detailed discussions. Owing to this situation the doubts create confusion and the students are unclear and uncertain about the course.
- Students don't have time and patience for online training and also it is easy to comprehend if explained beforehand.
- It is often seen that there is a clutch of students who are unable to understand through online mode and consequently they need to talk to other students for clarification.
- Lack of practice mars the students' progress. In order to make them perfect; drill and assignments are a must. For science practical at least twice a week offline display, demonstration and practice should be made mandatory.
- The main fear that grips here is the quality of teaching. If the course is not designed keeping in mind the challenges of online class, the rendering of it would be mediocre, much below the desired parameter.
- One more point which often tickles in the mind is the impact factor. Online class, if not handled with alacrity, would have either none or negative impact on the organisation.

Proposed Solution

E-learning is big business, and it is only going to continue being popular as time goes on and we shift into more digital lifestyles. If we want our e-learning program in our institute to succeed, we need to make sure that it is up to date with current standards.ICT is already on roll, but it is yet to find its feet. The best example of e- education application for the masses in India is its schools, colleges and universities.

- ❖ If the project and timeline allows for the use of a focus group to test activities, I recommend that we take advantage of this opportunity. Even if it's just a few members of the target audience - this will help vet the activity. This session could potentially exhibit people's personal preferences and help determine if the activity encourages the user to meet the learning objective. Couple the activity with a questionnaire and we can acquire great feedback that will ensure the activities are successful.
- ❖ While interaction is vital to the design of e-Learning, we should make sure that we understand how our activity will help our learner. If we are creating a course and we think we need more interactions, it's advisable to take a step back and review our work so far. Perhaps the overall design and flow needs to be re-evaluated.
- ❖ Smart villages are the need of the hour as development is needed for both rural and urban areas for better livelihood and Information technology will offer effective solution. To address any complex problem, Public Private Partnership (PPP) may play a key role.
- ❖ Accelerated and meaningful development can be achieved only if people at the grass root are involved. 'People's Participation' has become the keyword in rural development programme for better prospects of economic development.
- ❖ Indian Parliament has crucial role to play in sustainable development of the rural areas by providing legislative framework for programs and policies that have proved worth. The Govt. should ensure that in the implementation of policies towards achieving the sustainable development goals, the rural areas are not neglected.
- ❖ The citizens should try to subsidise the smart phones having android application in order to ensure the efficient and effective use of mobile banking.
- ❖ The Govt. must initiate to look for means of increasing IT penetration, thus enabling every citizen to use technology tools and services for cashless transaction.
- ❖ Community radio can be used as a tool of development of rural people as it has the enormous potential of voicing the concerns within and between communities. Besides being an effective communication tool, it can promote rural women's interest in gaining knowledge and information which would eventually lead to their overall development.
- ❖ For the concrete solution of certain problems faced by the villagers, interaction with them at short intervals will prove beneficial.

CONCLUSION

After going through the rough patches pertaining to education during pandemic and experiencing the implementation of online classes with its long list of usage and significance, I come to conclude that in the present situation online class is proving a boon to higher education. Attaining education of any type was never so easy and accessible to everyone as the fee is quiet nominal because it doesn't include building charges and

other unnecessary perks. E-books of any type and of any subject are easily available and the world library is open to all with minimal or no charges. The only requirement is that the teachers and the students need to upgrade themselves to the new normal by becoming tech savvy. Asimov, Issac. '*The Fun They Had'*. Collection of Essays and Stories, Ranjana Publication, Agra. Print

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