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ARTICLE

Online Learning in the Post-Covid-19 Scenario

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ABSTRACT

Online teaching should continue at least as a supplement to classroom teaching to reinforce learning, or as an additional mode of teaching splitting the class. It should never replace the role of a classroom teacher. In the good number of present-day classrooms, the strength is more than 60. No more the strength could be maintained if the norm of 'social distancing' is in vogue. Students, in general, do not maintain social distancing on their own, and they normally view the formal education environment as an opportunity for socializing and physical closeness. However, there are challenges in online learning which will have to be overcome since this is the need of the hour.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Lockdown, Online learning, Online teaching, Lockdown, Virtual science fair, Learning management system

The nationwide COVID-19 lockdown has forced K-12 schools and universities to close and send their students home which, in turn, has impacted over 91% of the world's student population. The closure has placed unprecedented challenges on governments, institutions, teachers, parents and care givers around the world (Lakshmanan, 2020).

With the COVID-19 lockdown, educational institutions have migrated online. This offers a way to reach students. Teaching and learning from home is a big change for most students and teachers. This is at a time we all understand that the coronavirus affects people above 50 years of age or anyone with the immune system compromised. Higher education institutions have many experienced teachers above the age of 50, both full-time and

part-time. Further, a significant number of students too suffer from serious health problems which, in normal circumstances, are manageable.

Without a physical classroom, how can you check that students are engaged and progressing? An online classroom brings together virtual face-to-face connections, assignments, files, and conversations into a single platform accessible on a mobile phone, tablet, laptop or PC.

What needs to be done?

You need to have interactive discussions with your class by sharing your screen (PowerPoint) to present your lesson and encourage students to ask questions using the chat feature. There may be a time lag during the transition of slides from one to another, so every time you change the slide, please give time for it to become visible. Record a class session in case some students cannot join during the live session. For assessments, you can easily create and grade quizzes in teams using online forms. Have a virtual science fair or poetry reading group as is the case with science or humanities, so that students get attracted.

Virtual Science Fair

Learning gets reinforced when we take part in science fairs and the like. When we ran M.Sc. (Science and Technology Communication) course we used to take part in the Chennai Science Fair annually (e.g. how ballast water leads to entry of invasive species and loss of biodiversity, if not sterilized before release). Science fairs are necessarily big social gatherings which would provide much scope for the spread of coronavirus. Hence, there is a need to shift to virtual science fairs. A website of a virtual science fair may have the following information:

- Share videos or photos of experiments on Instagram or Twitter with the hashtag #ChennaiScienceFair, or submit them using a form.
- Include a caption that describes the experiment. Please include where the experiment was conducted.
- A good Virtual Science Fair project website will include many of the following components: Text, Photographs,

Drawings, Tables, Graphs, Animations, Video, Quizzes, Games, Sound – almost anything and everything a real science fair would have.

What all are required?

Teachers and students should be provided with how-to information on online learning to stay motivated and engaged. Continuing to drive student engagement while outside of the classroom is a challenge, especially for those moving into remote learning. It involves lots of preparation on the part of the teacher. But what the teacher does in this format is reusable later. For example, flipped classroom where the role of a classroom teacher is done online and the classroom is used for activities such as discussions and role plays.

Get to know your learning management system (LMS) before the student arrives, e.g., Moodle, Coursera, Swayam. Some of the popular online learning portals include: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Coursera (free during Covid-19), Harvard Online Learning (partly free), Blackboard, EdX, Khan Academy, Udemy, Open Education Europa, and the Government of India's Swayam (NEPTL, UGC, AICTE, NITTTRs).

You may frontload your work and schedule posts to become available within an LMS on certain days or at certain times. Sans serif fonts (Helvetica, Avant Garde, Arial, and Geneva) are easier on the eye if you're reading on a screen; so please avoid serif fonts. You get to know how frequently you give assignments, which information students respond to best, which students are interacting the most.

Benefits

One of the great benefits of online teaching is the ability to have students engage even when class is not "in session". Students may use an LMS for lot of asynchronous work like video lectures and reading material. Then, synchronous time may be used for interaction and engaging the group. Vary the type of questions, either in a synchronous situation or on a discussion board.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is also used for Automated Question Generation. Students also experience some sessions by industry experts in an online format. When all of the students are participating and engaged, the discussion and learning experience becomes richer. Rotate through your class list who can post first when a discussion begins. Give a break every 40-45 minutes but keep engaged with general chit-chat about their well-being, etc, so that students feel relaxed. Reinforce learning by revising lessons already taught.

Set the meeting and ensure that the meeting connection request has been received by all, so use an alternative method like Email or WhatsApp. The teacher as well as the student should be dressed up formally. During a lesson, you can moderate the class discussion by muting students, or making them presenters. Unmute all students or a specific student during question time. Students may be randomly picked up to summarize what has been explained.

Some of the popular tools used for online teaching are Zoom, Google Meet, Webex Meet, and Microsoft Teams.

Online teaching has helped the teachers to keep in touch with the students during the lockdown period as well. Teachers send notes and e-books, and collect assignments through WhatsApp and e-mail. You may provide marks using Google Classroom. Attendance is taken by the teacher by screen shots of students present during the best time when the maximum number of students are available – this is more true of private colleges, where managements force their teachers to show results. Please do not hide behind a screen, but you may use a virtual background screen to hide house clutter. Internal tests are being conducted by some colleges under supervision of a parent or virtual monitoring by the teacher. WhatsApp video may be used for project reviews as the persons on board may be restricted to a maximum of four.

Challenges

Internet connection often fails in a country like India particularly in sub-urban and rural areas. Audio quality is often bad. Often, you cannot connect on time and there are many disconnections.

Some students do not have a laptop and are not able to submit assignments. There is no proper coordination. Sometimes it is difficult to gauge the reaction of students.

Teaching problem-oriented subjects is boring. There are safety issues as well concerning Zoom app as the Zoom server is located in China, a country which does not have stringent laws to protect privacy of individuals. To keep off intruders, you may have the waiting room enabled to filter unknown people. Attentiveness of students is difficult to gauge. Students should be self-motivated. Memes by students with screen shots and videos of the online teaching-learning environment are in bad taste.

The way forward

In an effort to reduce social contact and the spread of Covid-19, education facilities around the world are moving their instructions online. Attempting to "flatten the curve" poses new challenges for academia and teaching at large. Not least among these is the sheer urgency with which the new format is required, with many teachers having been told to transition away from in-person classes from one week to the next (Hospitality Insights, 2020).

The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) should put in place their own LMSes. What has happened during the lockdown in view of the spread of coronavirus pandemic is Emergency Remote Teaching and not Online Learning. Most of the content thus produced is haphazard and not reusable. Students should be allowed to take some credits from accredited MOOCs and the University should validate the marks awarded. Already, UGC has permitted 20 percent of online credits for its formal education degrees. Now the percentage is sought to be increased to 40 percent. Even the earlier guideline of 20 percent online courses had not been put in practice because of the resistance from the teaching community and general apathy towards online teaching.

In fact, the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development had been developing several online content through its Swayam platform. But it was difficult to make students in formal education access them, not to speak of

validating them for grades within the formal educational system. What was not possible with government dictats has been made possible due to Covid-19. It was like the tsunami of 2004 that displaced fisherfolk from their habitat to places away from the coastal zone, and gave way to the coastal areas being transformed into holiday resorts and golf courses.

Some research shows that on average, students retain 25-60% more material when learning online compared to only 8-10% in a classroom. This is mostly due to the students being able to learn faster online; e-learning requires 40-60% less time to learn than in a traditional classroom setting because students can learn at their own pace, going back and re-reading, skipping, or accelerating through concepts as they choose (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Online teaching should continue at least as a supplement to classroom teaching to reinforce learning, or as an additional mode of teaching splitting the class. It should never replace the role of a classroom teacher. In the good number of present-day classrooms, the strength is more than 60. No more the strength could be maintained if the norm of 'social distancing' is in vogue. In such a situation, a class can be split into two, and one group may have a teacher physically and another group may see the teacher on a video screen. Or else, half the class who are self-motivated may be asked to join with the class through a remote link. This is the need of the hour as students, in general, do not maintain social distancing on their own, and they normally view the formal education environment as an opportunity for socializing and physical closeness.

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