New ways of growth in challenging times: Study of Indian academic institutions.

Bhavya Kapoor
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India

ABSTRACT

In the wake of times of challenges as grave as facing a pandemic like Covid-19, agility allows the organizations to sustain and open up to their full potential. The impact on the business environment brings about forced changes in form of adopting new tools and techniques to sustain growth. Such is the case of Indian academic institutions, which have adopted new means of development amidst uncertain economic outlook and chaos. The purpose of this study is to describe how learning methodologies evolve and to evaluate the quality of the digital mode of instruction and learning as an alternate to the traditional face-to-face 'on campus' programs conducted by educators. The findings of the study support the significance of an interactive online medium of instruction and learning. The study delineates a range of ways of understanding the effectiveness of online teaching. With the suggested measures for improving the design, academic institutes may create an effective online learning environment to ensure meaningful discourse among instructors and learners. By taking the example of academic industry, it also contributes toward analyzing the effectiveness of a newly adopted mode of instruction or a learning technique.

Keywords: Covid-19, online learning, learning tools, learning methodologies, academic industry

INTRODUCTION

As a response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, academic institutions in India have geared up to adopt new ways of growth. While the entire ecosystem is enveloped by the outbreak of an infectious disease marking an indecisive cessation of physical classroom sessions and other academic activities, the academic institutes have shifted their focus to investing in development of a new interactive online learning set up for faculty and students. (Mishra et al., 2020) The study exemplifies how organizations are ready to fight the Covid-19 crisis and its implications on business.

When technology is redefining our everyday, the use of internet as a tool for teaching specialized academic courses has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years (Nachmias & Segev, 2003). New technologies are prompting academia to question conventional formats of teaching looking at the ingenuity, advantages and cost effectiveness they offer (Oliver, 1999). However, there is a dearth of research in the domain of online learning and teaching and its usage (Goodyear et al., 2001). Further, there is an evident lack of insight into the effectiveness of the inclusion of virtual mode of teaching academic courses in the regular teaching framework (Morris et al., 2005; Steinweg et al., 2005). Existing state of research also calls for an inquiry into understanding ways to sustain the integration of teaching pedagogies and foster the required abilities for professional development of instructors (Baran et al., 2011). The purpose of this study is two-fold. One, to describe how learning methodologies evolve and second, to evaluate the quality of the digital mode of instruction and learning as an alternate to the traditional face-to-face 'on campus' programs conducted by educators. The report suggests means and ways of improving the redesigned way of working.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is two-fold:

(1) What are the challenges faced by instructors and students during online sessions as compared to on campus sessions? What are the merits and demerits of one mode over the other?
(2) What are the suggestions and best practices that would make the transition from offline to online mode smoother?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative multiple case-study approach. The key challenges faced by the instructors, students, and the advantages of one mode over the other, were captured by the way of 20-30 minute interviews with faculty members and students of top academic institutes in India. The students interviewed were in the age group of 24 to 32 year and were part of management education programs. They were engaged in the physical classroom sessions for most part of the course and were made to switch to the online mode of instruction due to the social distancing mandate announced in the country as a result of the outbreak of Corona virus disease 2019. Additionally, suggestions were sought from both - the faculty members and students to make this mode of learning more effective.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that – both instructors as well as students are clearly divided in their perceptions about the online and face-to-face mode of teaching. They do not support either of the mode of teaching/ learning completely but find merits and demerits in both the modes from a practical standpoint. Their experiences are refined with introduction of online medium of instruction.

The Key Challenges/ Demerits and Merits of the online mode over face-to-face medium of instruction:

The acceptance or otherwise of a shift in course delivery medium and a broader perception about the effectiveness of 'online' vis-a-vis 'face-to-face' mode of teaching, is making rounds of discussion in the world of academia. Various views have been shared about the changes in the learning throughput due to change in the teaching approach. The emphasis here is on the instructor, who is central to the educational process. A comparison of the differences of the two teaching approaches with the list of merits and demerits of online over face to face mode of delivery, from the lens of instructors is as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix).

On the other hand, learning needs to be enabled through group discussions and constructive dialogue in the class. Both the approaches – online and face-to-face delivery, provide students with different learning environments. Most studies in this line of discussion have focussed on the teaching approaches so far, however it is equally important to understand the learning outcomes, interaction and collaboration as perceived by the students across both the mode of instructions. The dynamics of subjective learning experiences of online mode versus the physical classroom sessions are as indicated in Table 2 (Appendix).

Suggested measures to make the online medium of instruction more effective

The process of transition from face-to-face teaching to online mode of instruction requires due investment in terms of time and effort. The teachers are exposed to new teaching pedagogy development, creation of new teaching material, new design of instruction delivery so and so forth. Additionally, transition to a completely new mode of delivery demands required virtual infrastructure to be in place that can support the new agenda of high quality teaching and better monitoring. Adjustments on part of both the key stakeholders are observed. The adoption of the following measures may support faculty members and higher education leaders to capitalize on this technology and integrate it into the mainstream academic structure.

- The thrust should be on including the next generation tools like augmented or virtual reality which can enhance the user learning experience in many ways than known to us (Cortiz & Silva, 2017).
- Building up a robust learning and delivery programme (Revere & Kovach, 2011).
- The content for the online version needs to be structured differently, with inclusion of more examples that students can relate to (Arbaugh, 2000a). Examples can help summarize the learnings better. This will also help students connect with the ongoing class in case of technical glitches in between and overcome what is missed.

- Instructor may facilitate a question and answer round after finishing each topic in the class to check if the class has understood it (Redpath, 2012). This may provide a platform to all those who have doubts before moving to the next topic.
- Students from different locations can be grouped together for group assignments to enable peer to peer collaborative learning (Arbaugh, 2000b, 2000a).
- Discussion board may be introduced to exchange class learnings amongst students (Arbaugh, 2000b).
- Ensure that the faculty (instructor) is given adequate training to make use of the technical infrastructure provided (Redpath, 2012).
- Students should be conditioned properly with the technology and structure of the online class so that they can maximize on it (Redpath, 2012).
- Technical support or helpdesk during the class hours may be provided to remove any barriers in smooth conduct of sessions (Redpath, 2012).

The following measures, part of the findings of this study, may be paired with the above to make the online medium of course delivery as effective as traditional classroom teaching. Recommendations are made to enhance the online teaching and learning experiences in order to improve the quality of education.

- The presentation used for the online class sessions needs to be very comprehensive with more detailed explanations. This will help in case of technical glitches.
- Instructors may choose to share the presentation with the class before-hand.
- Recorded lectures may be shared with the class later for providing clarity where required.
- Voice to text software may facilitate understanding the questions and answers effectively.
- Wide angle cameras may be used for better clarity.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study sets forth an agenda for the organizations across industries to increasingly realign their learning and development efforts by integrating modern technology into their cultural framework. A conducive and constantly adaptive leaning environment can help them sustain growth in times of trial and contingencies.

The findings offer guidance for development of online teaching programmes and techniques to address the concern of effective teaching through this mode. It adds to the pedagogical inquiry into the current modes of teaching and learning prevalent in education industry today.

CONCLUSION

The unanticipated impact on the business environment brings about forced changes in the functioning of the organization in form of exploring and adopting new tools and techniques to sustain growth. In essence, adversity brings out the best in us. The study enhances the understanding about how learning methodologies evolve in Indian academic industry in the situation of unanticipated impact of external environment on business. The academic institutes are increasingly realigning their learning and development efforts by integrating modern technology such as personalized or byte-sized learnings into their cultural framework. They are resorting to more innovative technology enabled methods for delivery of learning content to keep the business machinery well-oiled.

The findings of the study highlight the significance of new learning platforms and innovative medium of instruction adopted by the education industry. It also points out the critical elements needed for designing the online teaching pedagogy. With the suggested measures for improving the design, schools, and colleges may create an effective online learning environment to ensure meaningful discourse among instructors and learners. The shift to the online mode of teaching for regular academic courses in the universities may prove to be one such strategy adopted by the academic industry to mitigate the impact of the present environmental catastrophe. The time is ripe for change.

REFERENCES

Arbaugh, J. B. (2000a). Virtual Classroom Characteristics and Student Satisfaction with Internet-Based MBA Courses. ***Journal of Management Education***, ***24***(1), 32–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/105256290002400104

Arbaugh, J. B. (2000b). Virtual Classroom versus Physical Classroom: An Exploratory Study of Class Discussion Patterns and Student Learning in an Asynchronous Internet-Based MBA Course. ***Journal of Management Education***, ***24***(2), 213–233. https://doi.org/10.1177/105256290002400206

Baran, E., Correia, A. P., & Thompson, A. (2011). Transforming online teaching practice: Critical analysis of the literature on the roles and competencies of online teachers. ***Distance Education***, ***32***(3), 421–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2011.610293

Cortiz, D., & Silva, J. (2017). Web and virtual reality as platforms to improve online education experiences. ***10th International Conference on Human System Interations (HSI)***.

Goodyear, P., Salmon, G., Spector, J. M., Steeples, C., & Tickner, S. (2001). Competences for online teaching: A special report. ***Educational Technology Research and Development***, ***49***(1), 65–72. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02504508

Mishra, L., Gupta, T., & Shree, A. (2020). Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic. ***International Journal of Educational Research Open***, ***1***(September), 100012. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100012

Morris, L. V., Finnegan, C., & Wu, S. S. (2005). Tracking student behavior, persistence, and achievement in online courses. ***Internet and Higher Education***, ***8***(3), 221–231. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2005.06.009

Nachmias, R., & Segev, L. (2003). Students' use of content in Web-supported academic courses. ***Internet and Higher Education***, ***6***(2), 145–157. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(03)00021-6

Oliver, R. (1999). Exploring strategies for online teaching and learning. ***Distance Education***, ***20***(2), 240–254. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791990200205

Redpath, L. (2012). Confronting the bias against on-line learning in management education. ***Academy of Management Learning and Education***, ***11***(1), 125–140. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2010.0044

Revere, L., & Kovach, J. (2011). Online technologies for engaged learning: A meaningful synthesis for educators. ***Quarterly Review of Distance Education***, ***12***(2), 113.

Steinweg, S. B., Davis, M. L., & Thomson, W. S. (2005). A Comparison of Traditional and Online Instruction in an Introduction to Special Education Course. ***Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children***, ***28***(1), 62–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/088840640502800107


R H
E J

APPENDICES

Table 1: Instructors' Point of View	
Challenges / Demerits	Merits
The movement of the instructor is limited.	Convenient to conduct the class from anywhere, anytime
Inability to get connected with the students so well	Travel is curtailed sometimes
The presentation or course material needs to be more robust and detailed	Content consumption with the class recordings provided later makes it better
Interaction in the class is lesser as compared to classroom sessions	
Class participation by students is lesser	
It becomes a monologue at times	
The pedagogy of teaching through cases looks difficult via the online mode	

Table 2: Students' Point of View	
Challenges / Demerits	Merits
Eye contact with the instructor is difficult	Flexibility and convenience is appreciated sometimes
The concentration and focus in online class is lesser	Some students feel course content is understood better
The student get into a relaxing mode unlike being active in classroom sessions	Class recordings provided later helps clarify doubts
Internet connectivity staggers at times creating disturbance	Students get enough time at their convenience to revisit the class learnings
Clearing doubts of multiple students takes up lot of time of the class	
Presentation with models is not as clear as in classroom sessions	
Confusion related to references made in presentation prevail	
Students are not pre-conditioned to differences between the two modes	
Content consumption during online session is lesser	
Students miss out on essential content while making notes	
Interaction with the instructor is not smooth and a bit difficult	
Peer to peer learning is lesser due to minimal interaction	

Sometimes multiple students start speaking at the same time.	
Class participation is not optimum	
The screen switches from instructor to the presentation creating distraction