2021

Digital platforms & online teaching-learning: Hobson's choice in times of Covid-19

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Abstract

Covid 19 has forced the entire world into an abyss of vulnerability. Almost every aspect of human life has been extremely affected. Among the important ones is Education. More than 1.57 billion learners across the globe have been affected by the closure of universities and schools, as per UNESCO. This is an unprecedented and precarious situation. Education, all over the world has faced the brunt and governments are grappling with this pandemic. In this situation, the onus of responsibility is on teachers, academicians to try and provide crucial support to help continuation of the teaching-learning process. Although universities, colleges, schools have moved very quickly to online mode of education but still more effective measures have to be taken to help students with their education. There is still more to be done and can be made possible by utilizing online services, OERs (open educational resources), online media, digital media, software, etc. The online available tools can be effectively put to use to create and share learning modules with students. Many reputed world organizations have made their online platforms available so that education does not fall a victim to this pandemic. These tools are easily available on the Internet and are accessible anytime anywhere on several devices. The paper attempts to analyze the effect of Covid-19 on education and review and discuss different online platforms, which could be explored more operatively to benefit the student community in the current situation. Also, analyze various weaknesses and disadvantages of this type of teaching-learning.

Keywords: *Online learning, Covid-19, Digital learning, Internet, Virtual Classroom, online learning tools, MOOCs*

Introduction

Also termed as e-learning, online learning has proved to be a blessing in the times of Covid-19. The concept has acquired a lot of buzzes and is being seen as the most viable option for the teaching-learning process in the present situation. By definition, it is a type of distance learning, which is devoid of any physical space or interaction. In some of the studies, the prospect of online learning has been termed as a 'greener'

option of learning as it is believed that this type of learning saves the environment in terms of energy consumption and CO2 emissions. There have been many benefits counted as far as online learning is concerned. It is believed to be more effective than traditional learning, with increased retention power for students.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had disastrous results and has disturbed more population of the world than any other pandemic. It has disrupted our lives to a large extent. The effect has been in all the possible sectors of the world. Among all the affected spheres of life, education is the most hit after healthcare. UNESCO has initiated Global Education Coalition (GEC #LearningNeverStops) to "facilitate inclusive learning opportunities for children and youth during this period of sudden and unprecedented educational disruption. Investment in remote learning should both mitigate the immediate disruption caused by COVID-19 and establish approaches to develop more open and flexible education systems for the future." (UNESCO, 2020)

According to UNESCO, 87% of the world's student population is affected by the closure of schools due to COVID-19 and over 1.5 billion learners in 165 countries have been affected. At the same time, a lot of world organizations have come together to provide solutions for helping continue the teaching-learning process. The UNESCO press release states that *"International Labor Organization (ILO), the UN High Commission for Refugees, The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the World Food Programme and the International Telecommunication Union, as well as the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, the OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie) the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Asian Development Bank have joined the Coalition."*

As early as the first week of March, in a joint press release, the IFRC, UNESCO, and WHO maintained,

> *"In the event of school closures, the guidance includes recommendations to mitigate against the possible negative impacts on children's learning and wellbeing. This means having solid plans in place to ensure the continuity of learning, including remote learning options such as online education strategies and radio broadcasts of academic content, and access to essential services for all children. These plans should also include necessary steps for the eventual safe reopening of schools." (WHO, 2020)*

Significance of Online Learning

As the whole world is grappling with the effects of Covid-19 especially in the education sector when all the Universities, Colleges, and Schools are closed, the use of online tools have become a new norm of the day. While students take classes/lectures through platforms like Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Google classroom, Google meet, WebEx, Cisco, and Telegram the ambiance of the virtual classroom is being adapted to by millions of learners across the world.

Among so many success stories related to online interactive tools, Zoom has been at the top. According to Guardian newspaper, "Zoom's revenue for its fiscal first-quarter between February and April more than doubled from the same time last year to $328m, turning a profit of $27m compared with $198,000 a year ago." (Guardian.com) Zoom on its website is training learners about the way zoom can be used for imparting education. 'Education over zoom' section on the website has links to – *"How to Use Zoom for Online Learning, Best Practices for Securing Your Virtual Classroom, Comprehensive Guide to Educating Through Zoom, Tips and Tricks for, Teachers Educating on Zoom, Tips and Tricks for Administrators and Staff, Student, Tips for Participating in Online Learning, Education Guide: Getting Started on Zoom, School Administrator's Guide: Rolling Out Zoom, Zoom Graduation How-To Guide, Best Practices for Securing Your Virtual Classroom, Use Zoom to Securely Host Virtual Board Meetings."* (Zoom.us)

Digital India- *Early initiatives*

Online learning or E-learning has been gaining momentum in our country and has become very significant. It all started with the Government of India aiming at "Digital India" in 2014. Digital India Initiative was one of the main aspects of transformative plans by the GoI. This helped India in integrating many existing schemes and made various new digital platforms available to the people of India. Certainly, the transformation has been evident in all the possible sectors like education, finance, healthcare, agriculture, and governance, etc. This has predominantly strengthened India technologically and by way of better connectivity. At the time, Digital India Initiative was based on the following three key focus areas and nine pillars were identified for its successful implementation (Fig 1).

a)   *Digital infrastructure as a utility to every citizen;*

b)   *Governance and services on demand; and*

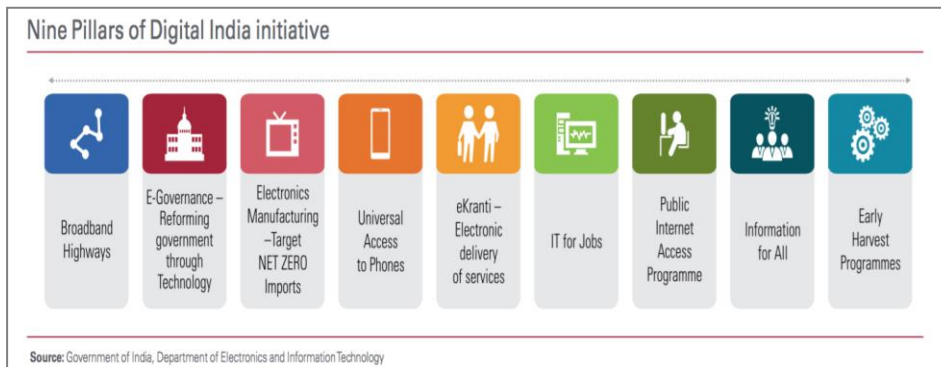c)   *Digital empowerment of citizens.*

Figure 1: Nine pillars of the Digital India Initiative, GoI

Source: GoI, Dept of Electronics & IT

In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), in March, put out information regarding different online/digital platforms for the use and benefit of the student community. Among many e-learning platforms, some of the prominent are Diksha, E-Pathshala, National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER), SWAYAM, SWAYAM PRABHA, NISHTHA, National, Digital Library, etc. Besides many more e-platforms that were already in use got activated and saw a lot of students and faculty logging into.

As per MHRD communication, the Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO (INCCU) has been working in this direction since the start of the lockdown period. As per the information,

> *"When the Government of India declared a nation-wide lockdown on 23rd March 2020 to contain the spread of COVID 19, immediate action was taken to intensify digital learning with equity so that students across the country could continue their learning even during the lockdown. The Ministry has, over the last few years, developed a rich variety of online resources that are available on a variety of platforms. While students and teachers can access these through their laptops, desktops and mobile phones, these resources are being reached to learners in remote areas through Television and Radio."*

(INCCU, 2020)

Education interrupted

While the term Digital Divide is less common in use, but the term gains more weight when we talk of developing nations like India. With around 935 universities and almost 39000 colleges in India, education has been badly hit due to the pandemic. Though the Government of India has taken excellent initiatives to provide effective digital platforms for the students still the gap remains. Both teachers and students have

been struggling to adapt to online platforms and the availability of proper technology has marred the essence of online learning. As per the statistics, "Only 24 percent of the households of students in India have Internet access and in urban areas, 42 percent of households have access to the Internet as compared to 15 percent in rural areas." (Singh Anviti, July 2020)

The case in our country seems worse when we see the statistics. One of the reports in The Hindu newspaper quoting the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, noted that efforts to maintain learning continuity during the pandemic might have worsened exclusion trends. It further added that due to school closures in April 2020, almost 91% of students around the world were out of school. The report as quoted by the same newspaper also read that,

> *"Education systems responded with distance learning solutions, all of which offered less or more imperfect substitutes for classroom instruction; while many poorer countries opted for radio and television lessons, 55% of low-income, 73% of lower-middle-income and 93% of upper-middle-income countries adopted for online learning platforms for primary and secondary education."* (The Hindu, June 2020)

Online Antidote

From coding classes to online tools for creating new cosmos for education, this is the new antidote for the lockdown. It is an exceptional shift that is more of a forced one rather than what we would have imagined. This new avatar is the new normal for education now. The panacea for this is online learning. But to see the brighter side of it, the education ministry in India has launched several initiatives for the benefit of students/faculty and administrators of the educational institutions. Let "Covid 19 not stop your learning" is among many other ICT-based initiatives taken up by MHRD to help our student community. Another exemplary initiative by the Government of India is that of the SWAYAM online platform. It is a national MOOCs platform and offers almost 2,150 courses with 1300 instructors from about 135 Indian Universities (Fig. 2)

> *"SWAYAM is a Programme initiated by Government of India and designed to achieve the three cardinal principles of Education Policy viz., access, equity and quality. The objective of this effort is to take the best teaching learning resources to all, including the most disadvantaged. SWAYAM seeks to bridge the digital divide for students who have hitherto remained untouched by the digital revolution and have not been able to join the mainstream of the knowledge economy."* (swayam.gov.in)

Figure 2: Swayam online portal

Source: swayam.gov.in

Now, to enhance the capability of developing course material without any requirement of resources other than an Internet connection, several online tools are available on the Internet. These tools are simple to use and can help the teaching-learning process immensely. These tools can also be used in developing MOOCs (massive open online courses). Among various online tools available, the following ones can prove to be exceptionally effective:

1. **Google Classroom**

It is a freely available web tool, developed by Google for educational institutions. It is used to manage a virtual classroom and can be accessed anytime anywhere using several devices. The teachers can easily communicate with their students and arrange their coursework. The tool was developed and released for use in 2014 through which course material can be easily shared among students. The same can be easily accessed through mobile phone apps, desktops, etc. All the elements like adding text, videos, presentation assessment, quizzes, grading, editing, etc. are supported by it and can be easily integrated with other features of Google like Docs, Sheets, and Slides. for writing. Written content can be created using these services. For better communication and constant feedback, discussion forums are available in the Google classroom. In addition to this YouTube videos, content, doc files can be easily shared besides scheduling the posting of material through Google calendar.

2. **Powtoon**

Started in 2012, Powtoon is a portmanteau of Powerpoint and Cartoon. It is an effective tool used to design professional videos for businesses, educational purposes, training programmes. To make your presentations and videos more attractive and interesting, this tool can prove to be very useful. The tool enhances the engagement

level with the students with lucid and clear visual communication. It has been observed that the tool has features, which enable students to focus more easily and pay more attention. The tool is suited to create animated videos and fascinating presentations that easily capture and stimulate the imagination of students.

3. Pear Deck

This is another effective tool to keep students hooked onto your presentation, which can integrate videos, audio, or images as well. The presentations can have animations, embedded videos, images, and much more interactive material. Easily available, this tool has the following excellent features:

a) Question/answers of interactive nature like multiple-choice, true/false, long answer, numerical answer, and many more.

b) Set of templates for formative assessment.

c) Customized features like MCQs, text, number responses, web slides, drawings, and many more.

d) Audio can be added along with slides.

e) Student of instructor-based mode.

f) Dashboard with easy interaction for students.

4. Whiteboard.fi

This tool is very instant in nature. It is a simple tool, which can create a virtual whiteboard for both a teacher as well as a student. By creating a class and letting your students join, everyone will get a digital whiteboard. The whiteboard can aptly replace a blackboard or a whiteboard as far as the purpose is concerned. This is quite an interactive board and lets student view the teacher's instructions easily. It can also be used for assessing students and can also provide immediate feedback to them.

5. InsertLearning

This is another useful tool to convert any webpage into an interactive lesson-based page. The features have a toolbar that allows you to easily highlight text, add sticky notes, insert questions, videos, or even put a discussion thread onto the webpage. The same can be integrated with Google Classroom. It keeps students engaged and they can find questions, discussions, and all material related to the topic on the website as posted and edited by the teacher. The portions of the website which a teacher thinks are important can be highlighted and even marked for an outside link to other subject-based information. Students can also respond with questions and discussions and can easily make notes.

In today's time and space, Internet has been a real blessing. Students, academics, learners must take advantage of this magic, virtual world. It has brought the whole world into our room. In the present situation when physical space has been denied to us, we can certainly find more ways to stay connected with each other and communicate.

Limitations of online teaching/learning

While online platforms are the only way out in the current pandemic situation, the same comes with some disadvantages. Online teaching-learning essentially requires both teachers and students to have dedicated access to technology and the Internet as well. Reasons like economic conditions or logistical, Internet accessibility, etc., the students find themselves alienated from others who can afford to avail these facilities.

Further, as many studies suggest, in an online environment mostly self-learners, organized, self-motivated and disciplined students seem to be more advantaged than those students who are dependent learners and face many difficulties with this kind of learning medium. Another problem, which both teachers and students face, is that there are various components in the curriculum, which ought to be done practically in a face-to-face environment. This, however, is missing in an online medium. This has also led to a change in the syllabi content to comply with the online mode of instruction.

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