Online Education System in India- The Challenges

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ABSTRACT

As has been apparent for the past several years online education has emerged as a powerful contender for the next new education technology. Although the previous technological breakthroughs that have failed to live up to their initial promise, I strongly believe this time really is different. Several online courses have been run in the recent past that has taught many thousands of students in a variety of topics. The human experience of online education is about to change; we should understand the issues behind the phenomena. Technology is touching every aspect of society and changing it dramatically. But there is one very important and indispensable part of the society that has also been tapped by new innovations and discoveries and that is the concept online education. It is an effective tool for development of educational sector in India.

Key words: Education, educational development, online learning, online training, interactive, live

Online education in India has come a long way with the development of technology. India is one of the nations that is developing at an exponential rate in terms of technology. With the population of more than 1.3 billion, the availability of high-speed internet and smartphones, India has the most number of technologically driven persons. The rise of the internet has changed the way of life in India. People like to do everything online, they shop online, do business online, make friends online, learn online etc. While eCommerce being the most significant online industry, Online education and learning stand right next to it. With the ever-increasing information available on the internet and the countless number of online courses many people in India prefer to learn online.

By Seeing the potential and immense popularity of digital technology in India, Our Honorable Prime Minister has envisioned transforming our nation and creating opportunities for all citizens by harnessing digital technologies Through digital India initiative. The initiative comprises of various projects in various areas relating to health, education,labour, employment etc. As a part of Digital India project, many colleges and universities offer online correspondence courses. Now let's go through some of the interesting facts about online education in India.

Online education allows for learning something beyond the norm. A learner has access to unlimited topics and global experts in niche subjects – something otherwise not affordable or imaginable for many. Online programs allow people of a wide age group to learn at their own pace, without inhibitions, and without compromising on their other responsibilities.

With the emergence and spread of COVID-19 in India, online education has trickled down to the most basic level?—?schools and colleges! When asked about their experience with online teaching, a student from a college in Bengaluru said, ?"The online option is a need in this pandemic situation. It has brought education to us without us going anywhere, and it is more flexible". Probably, students are finding it a welcome change from strict schedules and long-distance commutes to attend classes. For some others, who find learning in large classes intimidating, this may be a less stressful option. Many teachers are making the best of this situation by exploring new methods of teaching and assessment.

This is encouraging. But the moment online education moves from an optional to the only form of learning, and that too long term, the bad and the ugly slowly become evident. India is beginning to get a taste of this now.

Using the internet for entertainment is common, but for online lessons is a big challenge. Teachers may not be well-versed with creating digital content, and conveying it effectively online. A sudden expectation from them to upgrade, and from students to adapt, is unfair.

Body language and eye contact, which are important cues for the teacher, are difficult to perceive in an online class. ?"I do not receive continual feedback in the form of students' reactions during online sessions, which reduces the effectiveness of teaching", says a college teacher in suburban Mumbai. How many students have paid attention in a class? Of those, how many understood the lesson? Is the teaching pace alright? Are some students getting left behind? These questions arise even in traditional classrooms, but they are harder to address

in online classes. A parent of an 8-year-old attending a private school in Gurgaon says, ?"There shouldn't be online classes for such young kids. Their concentration span is small and they do not pay attention after a while." The 8-year-old added, ?"I hate them (online classes)!"

Even college students seem to value the in-class physical learning experience much more than a virtual one. Many acknowledge that phones can be very distracting. In addition, science and technology programs often include hands-on laboratory sessions, dissertation projects and field trips to complement theoretical studies. This aspect of learning is severely limited in online education.

Finally, education is not just about subject knowledge but also about developing social skills and sportsmanship among the students, which is built over years. Relying solely on online education may hinder the holistic development of children, and many may underperform later in their professional and personal lives.

While India enjoys a wide geographic and cultural diversity, it also suffers from a huge socio-economic divide. Only a small part of the Indian population has access to online education right now. Interrupted power supply, weak or non-existent internet connectivity, and unaffordability to buy necessary devices are major concerns. ?"In a Class of 40 students, after two months of online classes, around 20 students regularly attend class with whatever device and connection they have. Around 5?–?8 students are completely absent till date and rest are fluctuating", says a school teacher in Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. A teacher in a government-aided school from the small town of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh says, ?"It is a frustrating experience to engage students of lower classes in online mode. There are network issues on both teachers' and students' ends".

To deal with internet connectivity and device availability issues, ?'classes' in many places are happening via sharing of videos by teachers over WhatsApp or YouTube, so that students can watch them at their convenience. This too, however, comes with difficulties in understanding the lessons and promotes rote learning. The same is true of pre-recorded sessions aired on the television (e.g., SwayamPrabha DTH channels) and radio (audio lessons, through All India Radio), although they do cater to a wider student population that cannot avail live online classes.

That is not all. With limitations of livelihood in a family, the first ones to receive a blow are often girls. In a recent survey of 733 students studying in government schools in Bihar, only 28% of the girls had smartphones in their homes, in contrast to 36% of the boys. These smartphones almost always belonged to male adults, often being lesser accessible to girls than boys, and half of these families could not afford internet data packages. Therefore, lessons aired on television was the main option for a majority of the students participating in this survey. However, girls were found to spend a disproportionately longer time on household chores than boys, which often overlapped with the time of telecast of these lessons. Such gaps in education could worsen the already wide gender gap in employment in India.

Students with disabilities are among the most dependent on in-person education and hence least likely to benefit from distance learning. A survey by Swabhiman (an NGO working mainly in Odisha), in association with the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People, indicated that 73% of the students with disabilities had concerns regarding the availability of study material in appropriate formats. Also, 79% of their teachers were apprehensive about teaching effectively without use of touch to students with learning disorders, autism and low vision. The lack of effective education may further aggravate the high dropout rates of these children from schools (nearly 50% pre-COVID) in developing countries.

Uniform and effective online education in India?—?what is being done and what more is possible?

There is a global recognition of the need for inclusive education policies during the pandemic. To make online education more effective, accessible and safer, various online resources (links listed below), training programs and schemes have been developed by the Government of India for students, teachers and educational institutions. The teaching community has come together to form a nationwide informal and voluntary network of teachers, called the Discussion Forum of Online Teaching (DFOT), to discuss different aspects of online teaching, and create repositories of essential resources.

Cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) could open new possibilities for innovative and personalized approaches catering to different learning abilities. IIT

Kharagpur has collaborated with Amazon Web Services to develop the National AI Resource Platform (NAIRP), the future possibilities of which include monitoring eye movement, motion and other parameters for better teaching and learning. Google has also indicated future support in AI based education in India.

Parting thoughts

Online education opens up a lot of possibilities for students and teachers alike. Yet, it may also widen the inequalities in the socio-economic fabric of India. All our policies and interventions with regard to online education should strive to be inclusive. Good vision, sincere efforts and time will show India the way ahead.

Advantages of online education

Learn from anywhere, at any time

Since online education only requires a laptop or a smartphone with an internet connection, students can learn anywhere at any time. This flexibility helps working professionals to pursue new courses without giving up their jobs. They can learn at weekends or in their free time. All the course materials are readily available at student's fingertip.

Save Money and Time

Online education is much more cost effective than doing a regular on-campus degree. It helps students who cannot afford a regular college degree to accomplish their dream without spending a fortune on college education. Since you study at your own time, it helps to save time as well.

Learn at your own pace

Everyone learns at a different pace. In a classroom where everyone taught together, many students find it difficult to follow the lessons. This is a serious disadvantage of traditional education. Online education solves this issue. In online education all the course materials are provided beforehand, students learn it by taking their own time. Students can clarify their doubts by live chats or forums as well.

Recognition of online degrees

Online degrees are accepted by many companies and employers in India as long as it is accredited and approved by Distance Education Council (DEC) of India. Many of them are encouraging their employees for getting online education as well.

Disadvantages of online education

Chances of distraction are very high

Students can easily lose track of their studies in online education since there are no face-to-face lectures and classmates to remind you about assignments. Until and unless you keep yourself motivated it takes a long time to complete your course or abandon your entire course.

Fraudulent Online courses

There are many websites that offer online courses without the accreditation of any educational authority or in the name of fake authorities. Such courses will not help you to get any job. So it is very important to choose an accredited online/distance program before you spend money on it.

Cannot do courses that require Labs/Workshops

You cannot do an engineering course or any other course that requires labs or hands-on workshops online. Also in courses like MBA you miss the chances of professional networking, overseas experience etc. Which is considered an important part of the course.

The history and usefulness of online teaching in India

With the lockdown situation as a result of COVID-19 academic activities of every educational institution come to a halt and the adverse effect of the same is widely visible among the learners. Fortunately, the technology advancement of 2020 provided the scope for creating the virtual classroom by making a bridge between the teachers with learners from their home. It is a big challenge now towards the teaching end to make online teaching more useful.

The online teaching in India has got a long history with broadcasting space provided by the All India Radio and the Doordarshan for telecasting recorded educational programmes for not only higher education but also for school-going children. Though many educational

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institutions including UGC, IGNOU and NCERT using the services provided by All India Radio and Doordarshan still there was a need for interaction from the learners to be fulfilled since all these broadcasting was in recorded form.

In 1994 there was a paradigm shift as the ISROU provided the teleconferencing facility at IGNOU headquarter in New Delhi for the first time. It was a one-way video and two-way audio communication through phone line providing scope of live interaction for the learners. The teleconferencing facility was a booster for a large number of online courses like management studies, computer science and especially for teachers training in India. For several years a large number of educational institutions and various government and private organisations utilizing the service of teleconferencing provided by ISROU at IGNOU headquarter. In the year 2000, the teleconferencing got the recognition as an official education channel under the Gyandarshan platform. Along with other channels of Gyandarshan it was then made available in the DTH as GD-interactive channel.

There was still the need for two way video communication to be fulfilled. In 2005 an effort was made by ISROU in collaboration with MHRD and IGNOU in this regard with the launching of EDUSAT satellite designed by late "APJ AbdoolKalam" during his tenure as President of India. Despite all efforts, EDUSAT could not fulfil the need as expected as the communication technology still to be developed to support such an initiative. In 2020 one may find it very easy today. But it is a fact that even 15 years back from today it was a big challenge to establish a two-way video communication between one to many.

Today in 2020 both the teachers and learners must be fortunate to have so many apps developed for two way communication even in mobile. Now the challenge is not with technology but with ideas that how to make the online teaching more useful. I have been associated with online teaching for more than 25 years as a service provider and during this period I have observed a few things which could help the online teaching more useful.

One of my observation is that in every online course the learners already receive the study material either in printed form or as e-content. So no point in reading a lesson which is already available with the learners wasting the valuable time of online teaching.

In the limited time frame of online teaching where a teacher has to address a large number of learners and it may not be possible to respond to the queries of all of them and many of the learners may not get the chance to ask their queries. Hence online teaching must

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supported with some other mode of communication such as Email, Wats App, etc. through which learners can send their queries prior and at at the same time the teacher must be prepared to answer those before going to the online classroom. Many times the teacher may find similarities in the queries received from the learners and get an idea about the common difficulties of the learners. In such a situation separate session needs to be organized to address such issues.

Finally, it must be taken for granted that the future mode of teaching will further develop with more and more scope with online learning. But the most important thing we should keep in mind is that the usefulness of online teaching always depends on live interaction rather than silent participation.

Conclusion

Every dark cloud has a silver lining. Online education used to be an outlier until the Covid-19 pandemic placed it at centre stage. With this, the countdown to the withering away of the traditional brick and mortar education system has begun. All now depends on how bold and imaginative the world can be and to what extent it is willing to take online learning forward.

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