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Why Online Learning Cannot Be A Transformative Force in India

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One needs to be less than enthusiastic about a shift to online teaching in universities in India, for it is on the physical campus that young adults can now transcend their social backgrounds, participate in collective discussions & develop critical minds.

The Covid-19 crisis has forced an abrupt shift in the mode of instruction in colleges and universities from a traditional face-to-face, campus-based format to fully online, or at best, to a blended mode. The centuries-old practices of universities located on physical campuses providing face-to-face instruction have shifted almost overnight to online for everything from admissions processes to course delivery.

A vigorous debate is now taking place on what online instruction means for learning outcomes, student satisfaction, instructor convenience, the cost of course delivery, and more. This debate, however, has been narrow and has unfortunately sidestepped discussion of the equally important implications for in-class pedagogical improvisation, student capacity to organise and express dissent and how to build courage amongst students. If the shift to online and blended education continues beyond Covid-19 and becomes permanent, it will fundamentally transform the structure of the education system.

At stake is the monumentally important issue of the very purpose of an education system in society. Should its role be restricted to solely enhancing 'learning outcomes' and creating a cadre of skilled professionals? Or should it have a more expansive obligation to deepen democracy by producing an informed citizenry that is aware of its rights and possesses the capability to mobilise the tools of democracy for societal progress?

> How does online education plan to ensure equity of access in a caste-ridden, class-divided India with poor internet connectivity and a still-unreliable electricity grid?

The possibility of a permanent move towards large-scale online learning modules in higher education in India has to be located in the context of the government's reduced investment in public education. At just 4.6% of GDP, India's education spending continues to be well below the recommendations of the Kothari commission of the 1960s and of the Niti Aayog that it should be 6%. In a Covid-constrained budgetary environment, there could be a temptation to rely to move away from the higher maintenance costs of physical campuses and rely increasingly on online education.

Before adopting online education in a comprehensive manner, educationists should consider the following. How does online education plan to ensure equity of access in a caste-ridden, class-divided India with poor internet connectivity and a still-unreliable electricity grid? Despite impressive strides in rural electrification, the government's claim of universal household electrification has been questioned . India's internet penetration rate was just 36% as of 2019, with 451 million active monthly users. The low rate of penetration is worsened by low download speeds and unreliable connectivity across large swathes of the country.

Students in smaller cities and towns in India, where electricity supply and internet connectivity are unreliable, are likely to be even more disadvantaged when it comes to availing the benefits of online learning resources. The absence of quiet spaces in poorer neighbourhoods only heighten concerns about equality and justice.

Unsurprisingly, in a recent University of Hyderabad survey of 2,500 students, close to half the students revealed that they would not be able to access online classes frequently and nearly a fifth of them said they would not be able to access them at all, because of cost concerns and unreliable internet connections. Viewed in this context, the move towards greater reliance on online/blended learning is likely to further widen the gaps between students from privileged families and those from marginalised families. It is also likely to weaken the pressure on the state to invest in improving existing government institutions and open new institutions affordable to students from the lower- and lower-middle classes.

The Efficacy of Online and Blending Learning

It must be noted that the concept of blended learning is not new. But the ongoing swift shift to online teaching has coined the term 'emergency remote teaching', to separate it from already existing online or blended education, which requires careful curation of course content and close interaction involving professors and instructional designers.

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Online and blended education modes have been among the most rapidly growing industries in the past decade. A Forbes report estimated the e-learning market would reach $325 billion by 2025. KPMG and Google had in 2016 projected India's online education market to be $1.96 billion in 2021, with a total of 9.5 million users. These numbers would now rise even further.

The ongoing discourse in research on online education is a mix of digital triumphalism predicting the impending decline or demise of the brick-and-mortar university and of cautious optimism as complaints about online education's inherent limitations pour in from professors and students worldwide.

According to one study, the cost of instruction in classrooms comes down by 80% in online courses, with blended courses lowering per student costs by nearly 20%. Online and blended courses would multiply the productivity from the same campus space, it is claimed, while saving on costs for new construction and additional recruitment.

The current pandemic has put a spotlight on this issue, with proponents of online/blended learning making arguments that include statements such as 'students are bored of the brick-and-mortar classroom' and 'online learning is an equalising force in unequal societies,' among others. They also contend that with ever-improving technology and greater internet penetration, the gap in learning outcomes between these forms and traditional forms of learning has been narrowed, if not bridged.

Even as scholars more thoroughly evaluate the full implications of the increased role of online learning in higher education, it would be fair to admit that online education technologies have succeeded in meeting and exceeding the basic threshold of performance in learning outcomes.

A Faceless Medium

Yet, the physical classroom affords the lecturer the capacity to instantly alter a classroom discussion based on visual and social cues from the students. For example, just a few moments of silence in a physical class may be enough for the lecturer to reframe a question, play a new video or quickly refer students to a newspaper article. This capacity to quickly alter the trajectory of the lecture and the terms of the class discussion is reduced in an online lecture as the 'online space' between teachers and students makes such instant switches difficult.

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In addition, online lectures create a cognitive dissonance between teachers and students as course content is delivered through a medium where students often see only presentation slides with the lecturer's camera switched off, and teachers see only an impersonal student name-tag without an interacting face. This 'faceless' classroom not only has the potential to exhaust the participants, but more worryingly, it threatens to weaken the bond that students share with their teachers. This dilutes the incentive for both professors and students to connect with each other at a human level. Other complaints about online teaching include having to deal with privacy violations on platforms such as Zoom, when 'Zoom Bombings' take place with hackers entering chat rooms and spewing racist language and showing pornography.

Prejudice Busting on the Campus

According to John Dewey, one of the great American intellectuals of the twentieth century, every progressive era in the history of mankind has seen the elimination of the distance between peoples and classes previously hemmed off from one another. Dewey insists that it is through education that individuals get opportunities to escape from the limitations of the social groups in which they were born and come into living contact with a broader environment. The question that arises then is this: can such a process occur effectively in online or blended learning spaces, with their severely reduced in-person, on-campus components?

> Are universities only sites for transferring knowledge or are they also spaces where identities begin to blur, thereby helping to realise the goal of annihilation of caste as imagined by B R Ambedkar?

A physical campus serves a much larger purpose beyond aiming to deliver the learning outcomes listed in various course outlines. Today, most private and public universities in India are home to students from all backgrounds. It is in the common spaces of classrooms, canteens, and hostels that students exchange ideas and opinions that carry the potential to change minds. The gradual chipping away of prejudices based on caste, class, and faith occurs not just through an exchange of views, but also through the formation of deep friendships and romantic relationships on campuses.

Critically in India, colleges and universities are often the only spaces where inter-caste and inter-faith friendships and intimacies can thrive, away from the prying eyes of the family and community, allowing young people to think and act like adults rather than being infantilised in the confines of their homes. It is no wonder that across the country, conservative forces have tried to stop higher education of girls for the fear that they would fall for the 'wrong' kinds of men in the university.

In this regard, the physical campus provides a safe space wherein students not only have the vital manoeuvring room within and outside classes to live the 'life of the mind,' but also the opportunity to make bold personal decisions. Fully-online learning completely eliminates this physical interactional component. Blended learning is not much better in this respect. It reduces levels of interaction turning semester-long affairs to just 10 sessions (out of 40, for example). Is this sufficient time for bond-formation?

Are universities only sites for transferring knowledge or are they also spaces where identities begin to blur, thereby helping to realise the goal of annihilation of caste as imagined by B R Ambedkar? It is this equalising role of the physical campus that is vital and indispensable for national integration, especially in a diverse society like India with its various fissures.

When one considers subjects in social sciences and humanities, such as sociology, political science, economics, cultural studies, anthropology, and public policy, which are inseparable from value judgements and politics, the argument in favour of the brick-and-mortar university is more compelling. In recent times, we have seen that the most persuasive discourses against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens emerged in university campuses across the country. The sight of students holding copies of the Constitution and reciting the preamble was moving in a country where the middle class is notorious for its apathy towards civic and democratic issues.

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Such spontaneous protests could only have emerged in an environment where students can meet and debate in the shared physical space of the campus. If students meet only for a few sessions per semester on the physical campus for a blended course, it may be sufficient to achieve the requisite learning outcomes. But the loss in terms of being unable to acquire courage and conviction to participate in movements is quite substantial and cannot be ignored. Even if one disagrees with the CAA protests, one can surely agree that the role of the physical campus as an incubator of other forms of activism, such as anti-corruption movements, is indispensable for a healthy body-politic.

Leaders across the political spectrum, like Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley, Ahmed Patel, Mamata Banerjee, Nitish Kumar, and Lalu Yadav, began their careers as student leaders on campuses, where they honed their skills through years of campus politics. They have played a critical role in changing the polity in India. A move towards blended learning, by facilitating a reduced presence of students in the campus, can impede the environment needed to prepare such leaders of tomorrow.

Building Social Consciousness on the Physical Campus

For a young adult, the physical campus of a university is a space where a profound physical and psychological transformation occurs. The physical campus inculcates a spirit of courage among students through rehearsed transgression, such as the simple act of listening to and making arguments that go against the grain of conventional thinking. Students learn to discuss controversial issues such as caste and communalism in India, or race relations in the US, away from the controlling spheres of their parents, relatives, and community.

> The social proximity between students and their peers on a physical campus as against the social distance between students and their parents helps them to talk freely about issues.

Imagine an Indian upper-caste student discussing mob lynching or anti-Dalit atrocities in her home, with her parents shadowing her every word. How self-critical can she really be? Will this situation not lead to self-policing which would fundamentally block the process of learning and growth? The social proximity between students and their peers on a physical campus as against the social distance between students and their parents helps them to talk freely about issues, be it the CAA's anti-Muslim slant or the lynching of Dalits and Muslims. When such conversations happen repeatedly in a free environment, they help in building the courage and confidence needed to question injustice.

In India where the fault lines of caste, class and religion have determined access to quality primary and higher education, online and blended learning is likely to exacerbate these inequalities in society. Many from marginalised backgrounds are often first generation students from smaller cities and towns. For them, the experience of learning from peers and faculty in a physical campus is critical, as they cannot hope to get this kind of an environment in their own homes.

The physical campus allows for a certain amount of organising and unionising around causes that animate students. Whether it is a push for better meals at the mess or a demonstration against a controversial legislation, students are learning vital organisational, leadership, negotiation, and rhetorical skills. Can online/blended learning recreate the electric atmosphere of a campus demonstration, where students egged on by each other's energies, imagine themselves as society's change-makers? Can we realistically expect students in an online learning environment to snap together into a group, determined to campaign for a cause?

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The wholesale transfer of learning content, including topics in the social sciences and indeed the whole pedagogic process, to the online medium makes remote monitoring of students and colleges easier and raises the risk of surveillance. Overzealous universities, or even state agencies, could snoop in on lectures that they see as going against their personal convictions or perceived institutional interests.

The current debates on online/blended learning are narrow in terms of their focus on learning outcomes, student access, faculty mobility and the potential to develop new student 'markets'. When it comes to the social sciences and humanities, there are deeper political implications of the migration to the online medium that need to be more carefully discussed and understood.

The physical campus is central in higher education, if universities are to continue their admirable role in society as producers of educated and thinking citizens who have courage, can question authority, express dissent and be inspiration models, and also be organisational nodes for progressive forces-both liberal and conservative-liberal.