

Entanglements Of Teaching Literature During The Pandemic

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Abstract

The onset of COVID-19 pandemic has overturned the normative and processual structures of life and has also affected the education sector worldwide. Irrespective of disciplines, the traditional forms of teaching and learning processes have shifted to its online/virtual platforms. This research paper would discuss the entanglements of the teaching process concerning the disciplines of literature during the liminal period of the pandemic. Through descriptive and comparative methods, this qualitative research would analyse whether the online/virtual platforms are effective in assisting the teaching-learning process in general. Teaching in the classroom with the physical presence and online/virtual teaching possibilities were compared. The findings of the research show that in teaching literature, the traditional model of physical presence in teaching is more effective compared to that of the online/virtual teaching-learning process. The insights of the research would help scholars to conduct different perspectives based on the theme of the paper.

Keywords: *classroom, COVID-19, literature, pandemic, teaching.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century would not have had a more desperate year than the present pandemic situation caused by the outbreak of COVID-19. It had been affecting the normative life of human beings from the mid of January and keeps its race with a drastic increase in the affected number of people around the world. According to the Weekly Epidemiological Update based on the data received from national authorities, as of 13 September 2020, the total number of affected people in the world is close to thirty million and death number exceeded nine lakh (*World Health Organization*, 2020). Though the situations were not much serious until the first week of March, it began to increase in different parts of the world within no time. There had been several efforts to control the pandemic outbreak which were partially successful. Countries like India, that had effective lockdowns during the first two months of the pandemic outbreak, could not continue the fight against the virus due to the even worst economic struggle during the time and what was expected after it. Two to three generations had no idea about the seriousness of a pandemic spread which led the consequences of the gathering together even after continuous instructions lead to the rise of affected people. With the collapse of many sectors, especially the production and service sector industries, the world faced an unusual period where even the medical sciences were also waiting to understand the nature of the spread of the virus. For the first time in the history of the present generation, there were worldwide lockdowns, partial lockdowns and shutdowns to control the spread of the virus from one individual to the other.

Like every other sector, the education sector too was shut down without even having a hint about the possibility for a next reopen into normal. The world was moving into a

situation that clearly distinguished it into a pre-pandemic, pandemic and an expected post-pandemic division. The change from the pre-pandemic to the pandemic period was quick and involved with anxiety and uncertainty. Traditional models of classroom teaching, where the physical presence of both the teacher and student/s had to be modified into online/ virtual teaching and learning. This research paper is a discussion on the entanglements of the new teaching methods and platforms that was made popular due to necessity caused by the pandemic situation. Rather than being general in the context of the selected criteria, the research specifically considers the disciplines of literature. Through descriptive analysis of the ongoing situation in the world, the paper attempts to compare the traditionally followed physical ways of teaching with that of the new normal ways of online/ virtual teaching-learning process that takes place through various popularly used platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom and other privately owned online/ virtual applications. The insights shared in this research would be helpful for scholars to conduct further research using different methodological tools and theoretical aspects which can widen the scope of the theme of the research from its basic research to quantitative research with empirical perspective.

Around 250 million is the total population strength of the student community in the world enrolled for higher education (*ICEF Monitor*, 2018). Among the 850 million children and youth in the world, half of the population has no privilege to continue their education due to the COVID-19 pandemic (*UNESCO*, 2020). The number increases as there are students from low-income families who cannot afford the cost of buying the equipment required for a smooth and errorless online/ virtual education. Education, in a general aspect, has been in its worst condition to deliver and access. This situation has equally affected every discipline, whether it is the practical or theoretical aspect of the study. Almost all the Universities, institutions and schools continue to be in its hibernation as the situations have not yet been into its usual pattern. Though it is the situation worldwide, there have been certain attempts by different governments in partially reopening the education sector. In the case of India, the central government has not yet permitted to reopen schools, institutions and Universities in its complete functional mode. Exams were conducted by certain boards and Universities with strict adherence to the COVID protocols. The attempts from various parts of the sector give hope to the rebirth of the system to make it as it was in the pre-pandemic period.

As an attempt to continue education service without a complete halt, it was decided to reopen schools and continue the semester schedules in Universities and colleges in the online/ virtual mode. Though this is a positive sign of the previously hopeless situation of the education sector, many students are still out of the privileged category to have access to online platforms. Online/ virtual education cannot be a sustainable source to counter the problematic situation of the time (Sudevan, 2020). If it is not considered as a parallel source to provide education, it would lead to a digital divide which is a reality in many parts of the world, especially countries like India. Considering the courses that need practical exposure and skills like the professional courses, the pandemic would cause much trouble as students cannot access the laboratories at the required time. It is thus called a partial form of the teaching-learning process. In such an education system, the gap between the teacher and the student is much large as it only connects them virtually with the help of digital equipment and software. Though these help in connecting people during this crucial period, it also acts as a barrier in the delivery of the teaching-learning process. Apart from the technical and practical courses that need a platform beyond the online/ virtual classes practised during the pandemic time, other disciplines would have been better with the normal mode of classroom teaching.

In the process of online/ virtual learning, the disciplines of literature, though it seems to be based on theoretical aspects of the subjects, is limited and compromised. Schott et al. (2003) described the importance of classroom interaction and physical presence by expressing his view that the absence of physical presence of both the tutor as well as other

students would make students feel e-learning process as isolated and apprehensive. The importance of being within the group helps in learning the concepts more accurately with the presence of a physically present teacher among them. It would be equally difficult for the instructor or the teacher who tries to teach a group of students with the help of a screen and a microphone. Technical errors and disturbances between lectures would make it difficult for an untrained or a trained teacher to tackle the issues. As this change is sudden to most of the teachers in the world, especially in countries where the online teaching-learning process was not even a parallel process to the traditional classroom teaching (Calvert, 2001). With no or less knowledge in handling resources, many could face troubles during their initial phase of the teaching process and also it may continue with the change in the batch of students (Angelina, 2002, p.12).

As literary courses are unique in the way it needs the involvement of active discussion between teacher and the students, the one-at-a-time mode in online/ virtual education for live classes are difficult. The discipline relies more on interpretations and discussion on various themes and topics in the subjects. While being in an online/virtual platform, the possibility for active group participation decreases tremendously leaving no space for the real essence of literary courses to get shared among the group. As same with physical science laboratory students having trouble in getting the true benefit from the teaching-learning process (Vernon, 2002), the students enrolled to literary courses too have a similar or less problematic situation regarding getting the true benefit of the course. In teaching genres such as theatre plays and related topics that need performance-based lectures, the involvement of the class as well as the presentation skills of the teacher is equally important. While in the classroom settings, it would be easier to deliver the classes linking the performance through the effective use of gestures and variation of tones. Unlike any other disciplines, literature subjects require the presence of an effective performer than a lecturer in the classroom. Being in virtual classes with limited sources to enhance the teaching atmosphere, it would be difficult for teachers to be the same as they were in the classroom settings. Facial and hand gestures are crucial in teaching (Meyer, 2003) and it would be more important in a subject that seeks more performance-oriented teaching than a mere lecture. In such a performance of the subject-oriented stories, poems or plays, the connection between the teacher and the students are more than that of the lectures conducted in any other discipline.

As there would be more than one screen for the teacher, even if the video is open, it would be difficult to manage in a small space. The interaction between a teacher-student needs to be a two-way process where it progresses with identifying every minute detail of expression from each other. In a literary course, the importance of emotions and expressions in dealing with certain topics are much higher than any other disciplines. It is very much applicable in the teaching-learning process that "... omission of observation of student emotions may prevent professors or instructors from responding to student's needs" (Wong, 2007 p. 57). A meaningful interaction happens between two people when they share their emotions through expressions, gestures and complete presence with the other. Likewise, in a classroom atmosphere, with the presence of a group in front of the teacher, it is easier for him/her to convey the meanings through such different sources of communication. Contrary to this accessibility, the online/ virtual platforms provide the least opportunity to the teacher as well as the students to interact in such an atmosphere. With possible interruption to the network signals and software issues, the process of learning through online/ virtual platforms become less effective considering the teaching-learning scenario concerning the disciplines that come under the wide scope of literature.

Apart from the discussions and teaching-learning experience, in connection with the literary courses, the importance of group performances are essential in developing the interest towards literature. While in the atmosphere of the campus, coming together for such

performances makes them understand the concept and themes of the lessons in literature more effectively and clearly. In the case of online/ virtual education, the scope for group performance in a physical atmosphere is not possible.

2. CONCLUSION

Being in a situation where physical nearness is not possible, the liminal period of the pandemic has seriously affected the education system and the traditional concept of being physically available on campus. If it was essential to be physically available for lectures in the pre-pandemic period, the pandemic period has overturned the whole concept into online/ virtual modes of learning. Though it suddenly created a gap in the teaching-learning process, with the bliss of modern technologies, at least some can access to the system without failure. Even though it would create a digital divide, other ways of tackling the situation would make the fight against the pandemic even worse.

Therefore, though the online/ virtual platforms are not sufficient to handle classes even in the disciplines of various literature courses. There may be a misrepresentation of the discipline to be completely possible through online/ virtual platforms as it does deal with descriptive and theoretical aspects. Even though it does not impact the way laboratory subjects do, literature also has the lack of being expressive and effective during the time of the pandemic teaching scenario. It is compromised like any other subjects taught through online/ virtual platforms.

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