

## Virtual learning: a space which transgresses conventional classrooms during lockdown

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### ABSTRACT

Education has the capacity to empower individuals and therefore, quality education should be imparted so that citizens are able to participate in the process of nation-building by engaging in activities which can help them to sustain themselves. bell hooks claimed that education can only be progressive if we are able to practice freedom by confronting feelings of loss and restore our integrity. Virtual learning is trying to integrate students during this covid-19 pandemic as students are facing anxieties related to their existence and identity. Thus, virtual learning is giving a new meaning to education and adding a new dimension to pedagogy wherein space is no more confined to a traditional classroom but it is helping students to cross boundaries while sitting at home. This transition of space has led to fundamental questions pertaining to accessibility, affordability, and quality of education. Through this article, I would try to get closer to evident reality so as to address the scope of virtual learning.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Education, Virtual Learning, Classrooms, Indian Education System, Information and Communication Technology, Empowerment

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is considered as the most advanced tool for sharing knowledge and communicating in today's modern era. Digital technologies and internet have immense potential to empower individuals by providing opportunities to get education, health facilities, generate income, productive collaborations, interactions and discussions which could help in addressing issues pertaining to individuals and socio-economic issues. Digital belongingness can lead to transformation and transition of various physical spaces including, classrooms. But, it is necessary to comment on accessibility, affordability and quality of these utilities as our lives are not just meant for utilitarian purposes but, education is for over-all development of an individual which is not just focused on cognitive containment or retainment but it should emphasize on balancing both the hemispheres of our brain so that we are able to balance our self which is important for generating self-awareness and develop our own agency. Individual and collective agencies of individuals shape the future of nation and if education only emphasizes on memorizing facts without analysing them then it would not create new doctrines and older doctrines might not help us to address new issues. Thus, education must focus on emotional, financial and

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## Virtual learning: a space which transgresses conventional classrooms during lockdown

spiritual quotients which are as important as intelligence quotient. But, Indian Education System often focuses more on cognition and retention. Therefore, our pedagogies have not evolved due to our rigid and hierarchical educational institutional structure wherein a student is considered as a passive listener and pedagogy is teacher-centric. But, only learner-centric pedagogy can bring transformation in individual's levels of consciousness which can lead to transformation in society. Even if we are choosing a virtual mode to impart education then we must also figure out how to design instructions so that a learner is able to develop agency to interpret and analyse what is being taught. Education must address needs of learners rather than addressing the needs of institutions. Institutional needs are required to fulfil needs of learners but, we need to create a system which rises above biases and hierarchies. It is easy to comment on using ICT during COVID 19 pandemic without taking digital divide into consideration but digital divide is acute in India which can lead to crisis in virtual learning. I would try to address these relevant issues through this article.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

bell hooks (2003) stated that education should be for liberating minds. Thus, it must focus not on conceptual retainment but it must also emphasize on developing critical consciousness which can help the learners to develop agency so as to transform themselves and their society. Education must incite critical engagement with contextual issues so that they are able to develop alternative ways of thinking (hooks, 2003). Therefore, while using virtual learning modes, educators must keep the interaction democratic so that the process of knowledge sharing harnesses the creativity and criticality of learners. Progressive education, as defined by bell hooks, is the education which ensures freedom to its learners where they have the freedom to express without getting discriminated on the basis of caste, race, class, religion, ethnicity, etc. Thus, virtual modes chosen by educators should be accessible and affordable for all the students.

Mallick (2016) stated that digital and mobile technologies have immense potential to empower people as they provide opportunities for education, networking, collaborations, discussions, etc. Yet lack of access to technology and technical training, autonomy and adequate infrastructure might prevent students to take virtual or online classes. Often, these reasons contribute to gender gaps in education as women face these issues on a daily basis (Mallick, 2016). Education can help in empowering women only if they are able to access it. For instance, girls often drop out from schools so as to take care of their family members and siblings. Thus, virtual learning might help in filling up the gender gap if they are able to access internet but cost of connectivity should be funded by government or non-governmental organisations or civil societies. High illiteracy rate of women and girls and their lack of ICT training are barriers which prevent them from entering into information economy. Thus, we need e-learning centres to support virtual learning for women and girls (Mallick, 2016). E-learning and m-learning can empower women and girls but use of ICT will be limited as users require some prior skills and we cannot assume that providing opportunities for virtual learning means that everyone will embrace it immediately. Thus, we need to create awareness pertaining to significance of using ICT so that women and girls from rural and poor backgrounds are motivated to participate in e-learning productively. Lack of awareness regarding ICT has led to digital divide. Thus, providing accessibility and creating awareness pertaining to virtual learning might help in addressing digital divide which is quite visible in developing countries like India.

Various digital platforms and ICT initiatives are being accessed by teachers, academicians, students and corporate officials. These tools help in constant learning and offer several

## Virtual learning: a space which transgresses conventional classrooms during lockdown

benefits including, flexibility, comfort and interactive user interface (*India Today*, 2020). Virtual learning can help learners to cope up with their fears and anxieties arising due to existential crisis and lack of opportunity to express themselves freely. Students can be in constant touch with their teachers with the help of online classes conducted via apps including, Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts etc. (*India Today*, 2020).

Conventional classrooms enable learners to form peer-groups, discuss and participate actively in the activities organized within schools or colleges which helped them to identify their unique self. Due to lockdown, learners are unable to interact with their friends, colleagues and teachers or professors which is affecting their socializing habits and attitudes. Thus, they are either getting bored or feeling lonely which can affect their mental and emotional well-being. These virtual classrooms are enabling students to utilise their time and engage in discussions (*India Today*, 2020).

The Open and Distance Education (ODL) system contributes major role in the higher education system. Several individuals are using this mode of higher education for improving their skills, enhancement of knowledge, employability opportunities and entrepreneurship developments (Srivastava & Anbalagan, 2016). This system is partially dependent on e-learning resources other than opening up of regional centres in every state and zone so that learners are able to connect with their professors and lessen the sense of remoteness (Aneja, 2016). But, irregular access due to infrastructural limitations, rural/urban divides continue to be a barrier for some learners has been also taken into consideration by Aneja (2016). Thus, we can observe that accessibility, affordability and quality still remain a poignant question while discussing benefits of virtual learning. Thus, this paper would focus on lived experiences of students from schools so as to understand the effectiveness of virtual learning. This paper would also focus on three aspects: quality, accessibility and affordability. Without understanding these basic aspects, we would not be able to critically analyse the significance of ICT in providing education.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

The sample comprises of two students, of which one is pursuing Commerce in class 12<sup>th</sup> and another learner is awaiting her board results and is preparing for NEET. Both the participants are belonging from a private school of Korba district in Chhattisgarh. Their parents are working and they belong to upper-middle class family.

### *Instruments*

Semi-Structured interview guide was used during the telephonic interview for this case-study wherein questions pertaining to their interests and utilisation of time were asked like, 'how are you spending your lockdown days?', 'how are you preparing for NEET?', etc.

### *Procedure*

Many students were contacted but due to certain unforeseen circumstances, they could not participate in the research process. Some of them did not use any virtual learning platforms or apps and most of them could not participate because they did not feel comfortable or they had no access to PC or laptop or smartphones. Thus, I have chosen participants who had access to smartphones or laptops and have consented to be a part of the research process so as to understand their experiences pertaining to using virtual modes of learning.

## Virtual learning: a space which transgresses conventional classrooms during lockdown

For analysing the data, I would use qualitative data analysis which could provide some insights pertaining to effectiveness of virtual learning. My focus is to understand if virtual learning has been successful in equipping students with education and how these apps have played a significant role in imparting it. Thus, for addressing these questions, I conducted two telephonic interviews for 45 minutes each. As my sample is quite limited, it would be difficult to generalize the results but some insights might help us in carrying out further research.

### ANALYSIS

Virtual classrooms are new spaces where learners are trying to gain and share knowledge. Virtual learning is acting like a democratic platform as Aneja (2016) has claimed, for the students who belong from marginalized sections of the society but during my sampling, I tried to contact students who belonged from poor families. Most of them could not participate as they do not have access to PCs, laptops or smartphones. Thus, we can state that there is a digital divide regarding accessibility of these services as mentioned by Mallick (2016).

#### *Case Analysis I*

The participant who gave her boards in February- March 2020 stated that she is using YouTube to prepare for NEET exam. She was quite anxious about her results due to her average performance in Physics. She mentioned:

*“I am trying to cope with the syllabus of NEET but I am unable to focus much due to stress and I am unable to interact with my friends who have been availing coaching facilities for NEET. I wanted to get notes from them but, due to lockdown, I am unable to contact them.”*

Thus, we can see that COVID 19 has led to increase in stress levels and lockdown has been quite stressful for students who want to appear in national level examinations. While I asked her about using Virtual learning apps, she stated that these apps look quite superficial because some of these apps are misinforming students. She mentioned:

*“These apps are sharing wrong facts. Often, I get confused while using them. I feel, I am unable to choose the best one. Therefore, I trust face-to-face interaction with my teachers in person.”*

The participant prefers to attend physical classrooms instead of attending virtual classrooms as she stated that these apps are often creating illusions and most of these apps are not free. She also shared her experience of using Zoom App to connect with her teachers and friends and mentioned:

*“Zoom has helped me to connect with my teachers and friends. I am able to ask my doubts freely but sometimes, internet connectivity becomes a problem.”*

The participant seems to be quite satisfied while using Zoom which has good interactive user interface. She stated that she could have face-to-face interaction while using this app which has helped her to clear her doubts and get some help with her notes. Thus, we can observe that to use of ICT gets limited due to lack of connectivity as mentioned by Mallick (2016) and Aneja (2016). Although, the use of ICT is limited but we cannot ignore its significance at least when we have to stay at homes to fight against COVID'19. bell hooks has mentioned that learning can take place anywhere but a teacher must be dedicated, loving, caring, committed and considerate towards his/her students.

### ***Case Analysis II***

Second participant is pursuing 12<sup>th</sup> in Commerce stream. She mentioned that she is able to focus on classes which are happening on Zoom App and stated:

*“Kuch nahi se to kuch better hai. Kam se kam bore to nahi ho rahe hai ghar mein baithe-baithe (Something is better than nothing. At least, I am not getting bored while sitting at home).”*

While she was quite positive about using Zoom but she also mentioned that she was unable to follow lessons of Accountancy as it was quite conceptual and required proper training and attention for book-keeping and understanding concepts which were quite new to her. Like the first participant, she also mentioned that due to lack of connectivity, she was unable to complete her lessons on time.

Often, accessibility becomes a deterrent factor during virtual learning sessions. Therefore, government should formulate policies pertaining to internet's accessibility which could help in enhancing the ODL model too.

As Mallick has stated that virtual learning cannot be embraced by everyone immediately because they lack awareness about using ICT tools due to lack of proper infrastructure which includes lack of connectivity. Even in these case studies, lack of proper infrastructure was quite evident. In both the cases, learners pointed out that classroom interaction with teachers cannot be replaced by virtual interaction. But, virtual learning might help us in dealing with our boredom, loneliness, anxiety and stress to provide learners with new pedagogy of hope.

## **CONCLUSION**

In developing country like India, we can embrace digital learning only if proper infrastructure is provided as these case studies have revealed that people often get distressed due to lack of connectivity which could lead to distraction in the process of learning as it breaks the flow and continuity of learning. While the interviews were phenomenological in nature, learners shared their experiences via narrating various incidents wherein they commented that their friends were unable to use such apps as they could not access smartphones due to parental restrictions. They also revealed that most of their friend's parents do not provide them with enough privacy so as to continue their virtual learning sessions without any distraction. Thus, the process of learning becomes undemocratic even if the teacher tries to make the process seem democratic because learner's participation depends on their socio-economic conditions, gender, caste, etc. which can hamper their learning. Therefore, Mallick (2016) stated that proper ICT training and awareness could lead to enhancement of using ICT tools. During this pandemic, virtual learning has enabled learners to continue with their lessons and cross the boundaries to gain and share knowledge but it cannot replace physical classroom interaction because we would take longer time to embrace new models of education due to the existing digital divide which is quite evident in this study. But, COVID'19 has changed the world a lot within this few months and digital learning has opened new avenues for promoting virtual education. So, this pandemic might shut down schools but it has opened up a new market for education seekers and providers along with virtual employment opportunities as trainers or mentors. Therefore, there is a need to tap the positive impact of such virtual learning spaces which could be speculated in further research.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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