

Online education: Bored students and exhausted teachers | India Today Insight

The current online education model is flawed. What we need is a blended learning model that incorporates a range of activities

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Students join forces on WhatsApp groups to help one another study online. (ANI Photo, June 26, Maharashtra)

he COVID-19 pandemic has made “online education” a popular buzzword. Let’s be categorical about this: Replicating a classroom through communication tools such as Microsoft Team and Zoom is not digital education by any stretch of imagination. That alone is perhaps just 10 per cent of the ecosystem. Digital Education is a comprehensive ecosystem that not only includes innovative tools and technologies for teaching and learning, but also encapsulates a number of critical areas in the context of higher education. This digital ecosystem needs a robust academic infrastructure that not only organises virtual classrooms and labs but also conducts examinations and admissions and provides analytics for students and parents. The industry linkage also has to be woven into the digital education ecosystem, including elements such as placement, internships, incubation and alumni connects.

However, what we are seeing now in the name of digital education can be summed up as “bored students and exhausted teachers”. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced institutions of higher education to adopt an “emergency remote teaching” model, in which teachers are attempting to rapidly digitise their lecture materials and put them online while also delivering classes in a synchronous manner to students who are online. While this approach has allowed at least some engagement between faculty and students, it is far from optimal.

What is needed is a blended learning model, which incorporates a vast range of digital activities that collectively deliver effective learning. At NIIT University, a significant part of such a blended learning model has been implemented, based on extensive work done over the last 10 years, with 40 years more of research and experience from the sponsoring organisation, NIIT Limited. This model incorporates innovative pedagogies, technology-based teacher-student engagement and end-to-end processing of student administration, from admissions, education delivery and assessment and certification, to campus activities, governance and industry-linkages, placement and alumni interaction.

The comprehensive ecosystem includes multiple aspects such as an online admission-interaction process, an increasing percentage of lab work done through digital simulators, and work-from-home internships during the pandemic. The NIIT model explains that digital education and traditional education are not two watertight compartments, but a continuum in the growth of the education ecosystem. A judicious blend of the two can benefit teachers, learners and other stakeholders in the system.

It is in this context that we should view the advantages and disadvantages of digital and traditional education. An important differentiator in favour of traditional learning is socialisation, which is absent or minimal in digital learning. Socialisation happens not just inside the classrooms, but also in other social settings through peer-to-peer interactions, creating real-world experience and building confidence in learning. There are also other limits: Subjects that require introspection, deep discussion and debate are more effectively taught in traditional settings. For example, if one wants to learn philosophy, which requires the ability to deeply evaluate given knowledge and synthesise and arrive at new postulates, it will be very difficult to acquire that level of deep learning virtually.

However, one of the challenges of the traditional mode of education is that it requires extensive physical infrastructure, which can be expensive and can cater only to a limited number of students. Digital education offers a flexibility that allows access to learning, irrespective of time, pace and location. This advantage has been clearly manifested in the present pandemic where learning, however ineffective and inefficient it may be, continues even when schools and colleges are out of bounds and travel is restricted.

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The greatest disadvantage of digital education today is the risk of low inclusion, given the digital divide in India due to patchy internet connectivity and limited access to devices like smartphones and laptops. And that's why online education cannot replace traditional education, at least in today's India. But it certainly can play a very important role in supplementing traditional education and performing functions that cannot be done through traditional means. For instance, digital learning can help students who are unable to enrol at traditional institutions due to issues of distance, thereby improving the gross enrolment ratios, which is a goal of the National Education Policy. But for that to happen, necessary pre-requisites include ubiquitous last mile internet connectivity in rural India and inexpensive and easily accessible digital devices for learners across the country.

In the proposed New Education Policy, we expect to see a pivotal role for technology. We need to be cognisant of the massive resources and deep expertise that will be required to drive digital education across the country. The availability of infrastructure, especially in rural India, will be one of the pillars of this drive. The National Broadband Mission created by the government to provide access in all villages by 2022 should fulfil its promise. Initiatives like SWAYAM and ePathshala are steps in the right direction. Such initiatives should be opened up to all participants willing to contribute and engage.

To ensure that India is completely ready for digital education, this entire ecosystem should be available and functioning smoothly. Another critical element to make it successful is to ensure that people develop the habit of using the system. It is not uncommon to see people with ample digital resources not benefiting from digital education simply because they have not learned how to use it. While some state governments have started with providing low-cost devices to all school students, this needs to be a pervasive act in every nook and corner of the country.

Connectivity is not the only challenge facing digital education. This will also require parents, students and teachers to adapt to their changed roles in the new ecosystem. Parents are often concerned about the negative effect of excessive screen time on their children. Their involvement is necessary to ensure that screen time is regulated, and there should be an appropriate level of control to monitor what content is viewed. Parents must ensure the serious, attentive and engaged participation of their children in digital classrooms. To that extent, the parents themselves becoming digitally literate enough to plan and exercise this control is a pre-requisite.

There is a very big change in the student's role, since there is little or no supervision in the learn-from-home mode. Developing a high level of self-discipline to complete the prior preparation as well as the post-online-classroom assignments is necessary. It's not an easy task, but children will have to develop this capacity.

In this context, it is becoming obvious that teachers will have to play an important role to prepare students for this new situation and to equip parents to fulfil their role in managing the digital education of their children at home. Digital education will not succeed unless there is a mass-scale re-education of teachers and education leaders to handle this transformation effectively. Teaching methods have not changed over centuries and these practices are deep-rooted and persist all over the world. The massive opportunity offered by digital education would require extensive changes in the mindset and practices not just of teachers, but also of the whole community of education administrators, including policy makers, regulators and education leaders.

The COVID-19 situation is forcing us to find new solutions and pushing the limits of how teachers teach, how students learn and how infrastructure is used. At this time, students are bored and teachers are exhausted because we have been caught unprepared. This crisis offers an opportunity we should not miss. An opportunity to study and research the whole space of education to create new models of learning. The unprecedented situation created by COVID-19 has already accelerated movement in these directions and will certainly help students come out successful as independent, disciplined and self-driven tech-enabled learners.

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