

A Sociological Study of “Managing Online Education During Covid Times”

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Abstract: This paper looks at the emotional problems faced by teachers and students across the globe and Saudi Arabia in particular due to the sudden transition from face-to-face classes to online classes. The pandemic due to Covid 19 brings out the already existing digital/social divide in societies across the world. Amidst such a situation, schools and colleges grappled with new ed-technology. Fitting course content with voice-only features due to cultural issues, teachers had little confidence in presenting lectures on a virtual platform. All of a sudden LMSes, like Blackboard, experienced tremendous load and students had difficulty logging in and sometimes due to bad weather, they could not connect to the LMS. Hilly or remote desert areas had a poor net connection, along with phone incompatibility. As every cloud has a silver lining, the teachers found solutions to improve teaching, and engage students in online learning. Teachers are also forced to re-look at their teaching strategies, re-write lesson plans. With the help of technology, the teachers collected the best materials after hours of search burning for better learning. Unfortunately, all these led to burnout –

emotional and mental. As days passed by, students and teachers continued with the hope of learning and teaching from home with fluctuating bandwidth, slow loading pages/site, costly data packs, battery exhausting sessions and tired eyes.

Keywords: online teaching, socio-economic challenges, digital divide, COVID-19, teachers’ challenges, pandemic, online learning, online assessment, experience

Introduction

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved." ~ Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

The Covid 19 pandemic has brought into light the advantage and disadvantages of online education affecting students and particularly female students. In this pandemic, it has been found nations with women leadership did their best in fighting the pandemic (Garikipati et.al 2020). The spread of the Corona Virus led to shutting down businesses, schools, offices and restaurants. Since the mid of March 2020 it was a shift from face-to-face class to online classes across the globe. In Saudi Arabia, blended learning was already available with Blackboard and through the use of a “variety of media including text, video, and audio” (Picciano).

“E-learning” is like enacting “social justice” as younger generations in many countries need to support themselves and their studies and particularly young mothers find it difficult to come to college every day. E-learning in Saudi Arabia is playing a significant role in educating “young and married women, with children in some cases, who cannot travel without a mahram (guardian), are benefiting with E-learning tremendously” (Aljehani & Yamin, 2016). This discussion paper is based on the emotional challenges faced by female teachers and female students during the online classes. The major challenges experienced were maintaining attendance, listening to lectures and responses in a smooth manner and participation in online classes without technical interruptions.

E-learning During Pandemic

With Online classes, there was a hope that this was just the beginning of a new inclusive education system but soon we realized that socioeconomic and geographical location matters a lot whether it is online or a face-to-face classroom. According to Trading Economics, “Saudi Arabia is the 36 most competitive nation in the world out of 140 countries ranked in the 2018 edition of the Global Competitiveness Report published by the World Economic Forum.” Even with such a robust economy, socio-economic conditions in individual households can impact children’s education and lay open the high costs and unreachable network of telecom service providers.

A majority of us had been educated in informal educational institutions with the belief that the best quality education is imparted in classrooms with limited seats and lots of tests and competitions to prove ourselves to be the best. In online education, the paradigm changes from competition to participation and collaboration. Although some formal training about blackboard was given to students and teachers before the pandemic, nobody expected that how different online classrooms could be. Though the administrators expected teachers to jumpstart education online in a week, the overall situation was not so conducive.

Changing Teaching Strategies to tune with Technology

“Individual personality types influence various elements of human behavior, including learning” (Picciano, 2017). These varying learning styles, “1. Extroversion vs. Introversion 2. Sensation vs. Intuition 3. Thinking vs. Feeling 4. Judging vs. Perceiving.” (Picciano, 2017) make online teaching very challenging. There are students who are more comfortable in engaging with content than with face-to-face communication with teachers and fellow learners.

Salih & Syahrin (2020) states “the majority of the higher education institutions in the U.S include different learning style inventories on their websites to encourage students to discover their own learning styles.” Being informed of students’ learning styles teachers can design and deliver the online course effectively and improve the classroom learning experience.” To keep students engaged during live classroom sessions, flipped classroom techniques worked well. Active students enjoyed doing the tasks because they felt good in making themselves visible in an anonymous environment.

The educator’s approach targets capture and reuses effective person-centered learning patterns and make them “widely available and easily applicable” (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2003). Youtube, and discussion forums in the “process of knowledge construction in teams, discussion and evaluation, and other frequent interactions” (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2003) were found useful. Vygotsky’s research

also finds such contributions from the social environment” (Ivic, 2000) were real and needed. A student creating a bookmark, writing keywords next to a paragraph is about constructing the process of memorizing by forcing an external object to remind her of something; she transforms remembering into an external activity (Vygotsky, P51, 1979). In a study by Kassim et al (2020) the “designed mobile-assisted tense learning tool” motivated students to learn grammar.

Managing Student Interaction in Virtual classes

Though break-out room option is there on Blackboard, poor network prevents utilizing this feature to its full potential. It takes a lot of time to lead students to do their activities online and dealing with large classes are time-consuming as teachers are not technical experts. So, monitoring is a challenge in terms of time management as documents can shuttle like a feathered cork with feedback and updates. Even Gramsci says that the teaching body, in particular, would have to be increased, to maintain a healthy teacher: student ratio between teachers and pupils for greater “efficiency of the school—and this presents other problems neither easy nor quick to solve” (Gramsci, 1999, Pg 171).

Due to low bandwidth and unavailability of signals in many areas. In Darb, Jazan, during online classes, the author observed that 50 percent of students were present during the class sessions. Some students disappeared totally by citing their residential areas are away from the network coverage area. Towards the end of the class, few more students would log in.

Physical Problems in Virtual Learning Environment

In the author’s experience in Saudi classrooms, many students did not own laptops and were unable to open several links. Some did not have phones good enough for online classes. In Kerala, India, a state with the highest literacy also witnessed barriers in rolling out online classes. According to Huffington news, “However, *Manorama* quoted a study by General Education Department which found that more than 2.6 lakh students had no facilities for online classes. The data was collected from over 43.76 lakh students in the state’s government schools.” In some places in India, there are television channels which are used to air the course. In Kerala, “classes have been scheduled through the KITE Victers channel to ensure that students do not miss out” (onmanorama). In the author’s college, the students who were seen less in real classrooms disappeared totally in online classes unexpectedly. On enquiry, it was found that they live in areas where the internet was bad so they were not ready for virtual classes.

In the Accessibility report submitted by ASA-TISS in India, it “shows issues like frequent power-cuts and poor internet connectivity”, and low internet data packs even if students have proper internet with good electricity facilities. All these issues increase “stress and anxieties among students.” (ASA, 2020). In a study by Cappel & Smart, 2006, among technical issues, five users said they experienced problems losing previously completed (saved) work. A few others experienced problems registering at the MVU website or complained about the slowness of screen loads. (p211) Even a device can break and prevent the student from attending the classes. Weak or low bandwidth prevents streaming sessions or downloading lectures or attending live sessions and responding during a session becomes a challenge. Internet is available at varying fees and constitutes recurring costs. There are instances when students explained their inability to buy an internet pack.

Online Assessment to Measure Student's Progress

In the online learning environment, students' progress is measured through "automated assessments" and they receive their grades and instructor feedback through the learning management system. On examining various forms of applications and platforms, used in interaction, the author found that many of those can be substituted for each other "depending on costs, content, learning objectives, convenience, technology, and available time" (Anderson, 2008). The author disagrees with Anderson when it comes to the quality of the learning outcome. To help students accommodate and retain an interest in online classes, the examinations are kept at a moderate standard.

Ideally, there are different assessment tools to keep "Sufficient levels of deep and meaningful learning" intact through student-teacher, student-student and student-content interaction at very high levels (Anderson, 2008). Online examination is similar to open book examination, so many students do not read enough to retain information. Sometimes students respond from open books or previously solved answers scripts. Students' engagement in online classes is ensured through the promise of extra marks for better grades for active participation during the live session.

Social Barriers in e-learning

Apart from physical limitations, there is also a cultural factor with regard to the usage of smartphones. There are over-crowded homes and it isn't easy for all to get a secluded space for themselves. In Saudi Arabia, students are not supposed to take pictures or expose their face. So, videos are switched off during classroom sessions. Therefore, a lot is lost in terms of visual communication which helps in learning better and faster. Learning is a complete process of touch, see, feel, express, and engage and experiential learning theory defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience"(Kolb 1984, p. 41).

Collaborative Learning

Moreover, group learning or collaborative learning are important in helping students learn faster. Group dynamics play an important role in the success of a class and as learners don't automatically build the same relationship, an online teacher needs to actively employ techniques to ensure that a group can bond with each other. The dynamics of an online group of learners are different from those of a face-to-face group because students are spread out across various locations. While delivering the course lessons, teachers assign group tasks of various levels of complexities. This ensures some participation from every student and this a simple way of monitoring students.

Teachers are experts in their subjects and to solve students' problems teachers play an active role of a facilitators. Most studies confirm that group work also reduces stress among students. Though it is expected that students will interact with each other but cutting the ice to start a conversation with the other people was a challenge in the virtual classroom. In online classes, students were reluctant to participate actively because they were afraid of making mistakes while typing. They did not use the microphone because they were afraid that their answers could be wrong. Knowles et al draws upon Skinner (1974) to support that "learners will repeat the desired behavior if positive reinforcement is

given” and that “Giving immediate feedback, whether positive or negative, should enable your learners to behave in a certain way” (2005).

Teacher Burn-out

The teachers are not only forced to learn new technology but also spend time dealing with teaching students to interact with each other leading to teacher burnout. This teacher burn-out has also been discussed by Hogan & McKnight in 2007 and then by Laura Polk and Ted Cross in 2018 in their writings. “Similarly, time management and instructional habits formed from years of face-to-face practice may fail in the online classroom. These factors, together with the common stress of change, can lead many faculty members to burn out and underperform in the online environment (Hogan & McKnight, 2007; Cross and Polk 2018).”

The author received complaints from the students belonging to remote locations of lack of both modern devices and strong bandwidth. The author agrees with Jesse Kong, “However, technology should be considered a tool for instruction—a tool that cannot enhance learning and teaching based simply on its own merits.” If students are left with some links to go and access, there is every chance that the student will be caught up in clicking link after link because that is how materials surface online. Since a student may unnecessarily end up spending valuable time in collecting inauthentic information, and Vygotsky (1978) rightly emphasizes the importance of guided activities (Kong, 2018).

An online instructor needs to provide immediate and consistent feedback to create a sense of engagement and motivate group collaboration which takes away a lot of teacher time outside class hours. One of the channels for Feedback other than LMS Blackboard, is whatsapp. Students keep on messaging overnight and the administrative staff also keep teachers busy due to new work-from-home culture. A lot of administrative work has been delegated upon the teachers after COVID. Many teachers also lost their jobs because the schools were closed down and parents needed to cut down costs.

However, with practice and use of various tools and resources, online teachers learn to create engaging content and classroom experiences “while not becoming overly taxed by teaching demands and repetitive tasks.” (Polk & Cross, 2018). Teachers are compelled to redesign lesson plans to ensure its suitability online as a lot of student materials were prepared on Microsoft Word, which cannot be shared on BB during live sessions. Constant updates in terms of technical work is also a reason for teacher burn out.

Causes of Stress for Learners

Ismail Alrefaai (2019) summarizes that students face many problems, “such as technical problems, the small size of the screen, distraction, the accuracy and authenticity of the information, health problems, becoming less patient, and getting tired.” (Alrefaai, 2019). A cross-sectional survey of a sample consisting of 367 students living in Saudi Arabia was done in Taibah University to assess the “Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and their emotions and concerns during the outbreak. More than half of the participants showed moderate levels of stress (55%), while 30.2% registered high levels. There was a moderate to the high level of stress among students in KSA at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. This study found a significant correlation between a high level of stress and female university students. The study recommends the integration of online counseling and stress management program to help reduce the stress of students during distance learning (AlAteeq,et al, 2020).

For students who come from rural areas or rural backgrounds, having poor internet/bandwidth, absence of friends while learning, distractions at home from siblings around, or an accident or illness of a member in the family which disrupts learning. Blackboard being a heavy platform, it needs strong internet, so a teacher has to keep back-ups on Google Drive, or forward clips and content through WhatsApp in the form of pdf, jpeg or ppt. Students often complained of inaudibility and were seen disconnected due to bad internet, heavy rains, etc. Inaudibility is a reason for discontentment for both learning and teaching experiences. Sometimes, if they unmuted themselves to respond to questions, they lost the internet connection. Since students were using phones, it had a further limitation in viewing the content on the screen like ‘inbuilt whiteboard’ on BB. Links for the recorded sessions are available but due to bad internet, it is of little use. Back-to-back classes also drains off the phone battery forcing the student to drop off during live sessions.

We often make hasty moves without knowing whether the content was clear to the students or not. We need to give around a minute to the person on the other side to respond because of network issues. The message reaches at different times to different students because of internet bandwidth. Some software has break-out room features but all students are not connected at the same time. In such a case we have to assign the task as a whole group and use chat box. According to Drischoll, (1998) “Strategies for learning with computers are most effective for group learning, as opposed to self-paced instruction” as online learning encourages “analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information in order to construct knowledge” (Drischoll, P355).

However, the author has observed the behavioral pattern of students does not change online overnight because they are still conscious of being heard through the microphone and being seen through their written response. The shy and disinterested ones remain mute. Taking student behavior into consideration, students are divided into groups so that absentee students can be guided by other learners. In this way, teachers keep their students connected to each other.

CONCLUSION

The opportunities that are thrown by this pandemic are galore but as nations and societies, we will need time to tap it. Teachers and students will need the training to update themselves and engage with modern technology. To conduct a speaking examination online strong and stable internet, good microphones and tools and ways to store data. “Also, as part of their commitment to society, local organizations should contribute to the advancement of education by providing educational institutions and their students with technical support (e.g., laptops, iPads or headphones) to reduce the stress of learning in a time of unease” (Al-Nofaie, 2020).

In absence of school administrators, a language teacher has to work overtime to explain administrative rules to students and manage records. Even Dewey says that it is “much more difficult task to work out the kinds of materials, of methods, and of social relationships that are appropriate to the new education than is the case with traditional education” (Dewey. Pg 29). To create a linkage between online school and life which requires skills for interaction, “the teacher becomes a facilitator” in online learning (Dewey). Al-Nofaie’s study explains that “motivated students can become more anxious students in VLEs (Virtual Learning Environment), and that many students prefer physical interaction.” To believe “education is a development within”, one should have clear conceptions of what experience means.

Unless the experience is so conceived that the result is a plan for deciding upon subject-matter, upon methods of instruction and discipline, and upon material equipment and social organization of the school, it is wholly in the air” (Dewey, 1997, Pg. 30).

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