

LIMITATIONS OF ONLINE LEARNING

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

India has been under lockdown in a desperate attempt to contain the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). Even when the lockdown gets lifted eventually, the government may not allow large congregations in restricted physical spaces, including campuses.

Universities and colleges were in the middle of the second semester of their academic year when the lockdown was enforced. There was anxiety, particularly about the graduating batches of students, lest the ongoing session should be declared a 'zero semester'. This prompted a number of local initiatives. There were attempts from individual teachers to keep their students engaged. A few universities made arrangements for teachers to hold their classes virtually through video conferencing services such as Zoom. The transition to virtual modes was relatively less difficult for those institutions that had, even prior to the lockdown, adopted learning management system platforms. All the above were well-meaning attempts to keep the core educational processes going through this period.

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An April 13 report quoted the UGC Chairman as saying that to maintain social distancing, e-education was the only way out. This was clearly meant to prepare the higher education community for the exigencies of a protracted period of closure of campuses.

However, close on the heels of this, he was also quoted as saying that online education was likely to be adopted as a strategy to enhance the gross enrolment ratio in higher education. This prompts many questions about the appropriateness of what may be an effective contingency measure to tide over the pandemic crisis to be deployed as a long-term strategy for enhancing enrolment in higher education. One, how far will online education help support greater access to and success in higher education among those who are on the margins? Two, how equipped are digital forms of education to support the depth and diversity of learning in higher education? Three, is there an unstated political motivation for this shift in strategy?

Higher education has an influx of students who are first-generation aspirants. They have no cultural capital to bank on while struggling their way through college. Access is not merely enrolment. It also includes effective participation in curricular processes, which includes negotiating through language and social barriers. These students are also from the other side of the digital divide which makes them vulnerable to a double disadvantage if digital modes become the mainstay of education. Unless they receive consistent hand-holding and backstopping, they tend to remain on the margins and eventually drop out or fail. It is therefore necessary to think deeply and gather research-based evidence on the extent to which online education can be deployed to help enhance the access and success rates.

[Coronavirus](#) | [In the time of the pandemic, classes go online and on air](#)

Acquisition of given knowledge that can be transmitted didactically by a teacher or a text constitutes only one minor segment of curricular content. It is this segment that is largely amenable to online and digital forms of transaction. But learning in higher education means much more than this. It involves development of analytical and other intellectual skills, the ability to critically deconstruct and evaluate given knowledge, and the creativity to make new connections and syntheses. It also means to acquire practical skills, inquire, seek solutions to complex problems, and learn to work in teams. All these assume direct human engagement –

not just teacher-student interaction, but also peer interactions. Deconstructing given knowledge in relative isolation is never the same as doing it in a group. Arguably, some of this can, to some extent, be built on to a digital platform. But curricular knowledge has a tendency to adjust its own contours according to the mode of transaction and the focus of evaluation. It gets collapsed into largely information-based content when transacted through standard structures of teaching-learning and examination. While digital forms of learning have the potential to enable students to pursue independent learning, conventional and digital forms of education should not be considered mutually exclusive. Online learning needs to be understood as one strand in a complex tapestry of curricular communication that may still assign an important central role to direct human engagement and social learning.

Institutions of open and distance learning (ODL), established during the mid-1960s to 1980s, were a consequence of explorations for less expensive models for provisioning access to higher education. ODL may also have been considered by governments at that time “as a safe strategy (in the light of instances of campus turbulence) for managing mass aspirations for higher education without necessarily effecting large congregations on campuses” (Menon, 2016). One wonders whether there is a similar motivation behind the enthusiasm for online education.

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