

# THE PANDEMIC IMPOSES A STEEP LEARNING CURVE

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

Across the world, education has been drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most instruction has moved online; across the country, schools, colleges, universities and research establishments have been shut with no idea of when it will be possible to safely reopen. Higher education has gone digital where possible; or else it has simply been put on hold.

In the wake of the pandemic, other countries have embraced online education with mixed enthusiasm. Many universities in the United Kingdom and the United States have announced that the coming academic year will be held mainly online. At the same time, educationists and policy makers advise caution. Online education has not lived up to its potential.

Can online learning replace the school classroom?

Given our diversity in institutions of higher education — private and governmental colleges and universities, research institutes, professional colleges, State and central universities and so on — the Indian education system has had a very heterogeneous response to the pandemic. The reactions also reflect the contrast in rural versus urban infrastructure, the variable quality of staff, and the diverse types of subjects that are taught.

There will surely be serious long-term effects, considering the scale of the social, political and economic changes that have been occurring these past several months.

From a purely pedagogic point of view, it is clear that technology will play a bigger role in education in the coming years.

However, it will be highly subject-specific. Courses that traditionally need a laboratory or practical component are an obvious example where online classes cannot offer an alternative. The adoption or integration of technology in education also depends on the specific institution and its location: there is a huge digital divide in the country in terms of bandwidth and reliable connectivity, as well as very unequal access to funding.

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Beyond classroom lectures and courses, there has been a serious impact on academic research in all disciplines. There is need for close personal interaction and discussion in research supervision, and it is not clear when and how doctoral research and supervision can resume. In addition, the related economic crisis has consequences for funding, both of research as well as for the maintenance of research infrastructure. These are very long-term effects.

About a month ago we asked teachers and students across India to share their experiences of education during the crisis and to discuss their personal view of the future, keeping their institutions and subjects in mind. (These thoughtful articles can be [read at Indian Academy of Sciences](#))

Some things are self-evident. Not all students have equal access to the Internet, and more than half in any class in any institution are simply not able to attend lectures in real time for want of the required combination of hardware and electrical connectivity in their homes. This is more pronounced in rural areas and non-metro cities, and for lower income groups as well.

Also read | [In sync with technology](#)

Most teachers in India view online instruction with caution. The shift online is in response to a crisis and was poorly planned. Online teaching is a separate didactic genre in itself — one that requires investment of time and resources that very few teachers could come up with in a hurry. Many online classes are poorly executed video versions of regular classroom lectures. Across the board, teachers recognise this as unsatisfactory.

Online higher education using MOOCs, or massive open online classrooms, has been encouraged by the Ministry of Human Resource Development for some time now via the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) and SWAYAM platforms. (SWAYAM is a Hindi acronym for “Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds”.) If this is to make a serious difference, both the quality and quantity of online courses need to be enhanced. These are presently used to augment classroom instruction but if these can be taken for credit, it may help address the question of access to quality education. There is a positive aspect of even a partial move to online education: making lectures available online in public and open websites accelerates democratisation of knowledge and the wide distribution of learning opportunities.

Also read | [Why e-learning isn't a sustainable solution to the COVID-19 education crisis in India](#)

This is a chance to re-imagine higher education in India. For long this has been elitist and exclusionary; education has been less about learning and more about acquiring degrees. The pandemic can change that if we let it.

Our higher education system can be more inclusive. If going online loses the human touch, the advantage of becoming available to many many more people who aspire to learn is worth the trade. If giving proctored examinations in a socially distanced world is more difficult, what needs to change is the idea of proctored examinations. There are simpler ways to validate pedagogy, some of which can be found in our own traditions. Gandhiji's “Nai Talim” put a high premium on self study and experiential learning, for instance.

Significant qualitative changes can come about if we plan now. Digital tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) — already used in teaching language — can be adapted to deliver personalised instruction based on the learning needs for each student. The use of AI can improve learning outcomes; in particular, this can be a boon for teaching students who are differently-abled.

Also read | [In the time of online classes, Northeast waits for a faint signal from a distant tower](#)

The adoption of online education needs to be done with sensitivity. What is needed at this time is imagination and a commitment to decentralisation in education. Pedagogic material must be made available in our other national languages; this will extend access, and can help overcome staff shortages that plague remote institutions. The state will have to bear much of the responsibility, both to improve digital infrastructure and to ensure that every needy student has access to a laptop or smartphone.

Campuses across India are desolate now, empty and inactive. Estimates are that COVID-19 will be seasonal, recurring every so often till 2022 or maybe 2024. So when these institutions reopen, they must do so with extreme caution. Blended modes of education will be unavoidable: online instruction where possible, and limited contact for laboratory instruction and individual mentoring. If this can lead to the emergence of a new pedagogic paradigm, we would have made the sweetest use of this adversity.

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