Approaching Research

Beyond Disruptions: In Search of Learning Continuity through Digital Lens

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If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow-

John Dewey

In a fast-paced world where shocks and disruptions are an ever-present reality, every aspect of society needs to be carefully viewed through the lens of learning. Disruptions, when go unattended or mismanaged, often come at a huge cost leading to sudden disconnects and shifts. The statement strongly directs our attention to the context of higher learning institutions across the globe today. Besides exposing the growing inequities in our educational system, the disruptive impacts of the Covid pandemic have refashioned the education scenario by compelling universities and students to evolve in a hitherto 'unfamiliar online terrain' in record time. Abrupt campus closures persuaded drastic transition to an online learning environment through remote class sessions, virtual instructions and webinars on virtual learning platforms.

Post pandemic new normal saw the further acceleration of the move towards digitalization of knowledge transmission to sustain an unbroken flow of learning. Complementing the gentle restoration of situational normalcy is a growing realization of the plentiful opportunities unleashed by e-learning in the form of new techniques and methodologies that may take learners on a fairly

smooth ride in the digital age. Given the ease and comfort of options such as recorded lessons, tailored experiential learning and enhanced engagement the educational practice of blended learning is being looked upon as a progressive disruptive innovation. In the evolving educational milieu of today convergence of physical and digital learning is recreating classrooms into potentially powerful teaching and learning arenas. Hailed as a "thoughtful fusion" of in-person classroom teaching and ICT-mediated web-based learning, the hybrid learning mode offers expanded scope for collaborative, creative and computer-assisted learning. The complex and adaptive approach combines the components of both online and face-to-face teaching wherein the context stands decisive in determining the proportion and nature of the blend. Pioneers of blended learning prefer using technology as an engine of personalization, deeper

learning and optimization of students' progress. To make the blended learning experience profound and meaningful classroom instruction time may be either replaced or augmented by online learning experiences created through virtual laboratories, virtual field trips, read-aloud by authors, gamification, etc. Online learning can thus include varying degrees of interaction or just time alone in independent study and higher-order learning activities. Quality blended courses require both online and in-person activities to be intense, engaging and challenging. Getting the right degree of blend with the appropriate set of tools for each aspect of the course is decisive. Blends are often personalized in keeping with the subject, learners' needs and curriculum requirements. The various learning experiences in synthesis complement each other and are planned or orchestrated in ways so that they run in parallel and converge impeccably towards the realization of pre-defined learning outcomes.

As steered by NEP 2020 policy directions India's current efforts towards mitigating the Covid mayhem are firmly hinged on technology enablement initiatives with a specific focus on strengthening digital learning, digital universities and digital infrastructure. While the potentials of blended learning are limitless (particularly its ability to bring world-class education to the doorsteps of those having restricted flexibility and resources with the help of a single internet connection), digital equity and inclusion are critical to leveraging these benefits. The new policy advocates systematic integration of technology in teaching and learning in higher education institutions through policy development, capacity building and the use of appropriate low-cost technologies. As a powerful booster, the UGC recently floated a host of fresh ideas around the implementation of a blended learning approach, thereby formally announcing the possibility to conduct up to 40 per cent of teaching online.

While disruptive incidents, given their highly complex and dynamic character, call for holistic, strategic, and adaptive responses, our academic institutions are found wanting in their strategic planning and preparedness initiatives to cope with the ongoing and potentially more frequent crises. Knowledge construction in a connected world requires teachers to approach the classroom creatively and sensitively. The learning process by adapting itself to learners' interests, needs, pace and styles on an everyday basis can standardize experiential learning with a personal touch. To make quality education a reality mere screen-based education can achieve little unless accompanied by meaningful experiential and constructive activity-based learning in both the modes. Learning comes alive only when learners go beyond the classroom dictates of the text/teacher to explore and experience the real-world connections in the environment around them. Blended learning offers a co-learning space designed for collaborative engagement wherein courses may be structured flexibly around short projects based on differential skill levels of students. To reduce feelings of isolation from spreading among introverted or remotely-located students, active collaborative learning can be promoted playfully through a variety of activities- including small group assignments, puzzle-solving, case studies, role-plays, simulations, group discussions, and so on. As a way of avoiding digital fatigue, learning activities may also be designed around fewer screen-based exercises. While emerging

technologies may be seen as excellent means to heighten students' motivation and engagement, navigating the slippery virtual terrain calls for an altogether new approach to curriculum design, delivery and assessment.

As architects of learning experiences, the instructor is instrumental in creating a warm and inviting environment of shared goal-setting, collective exploration and meaning-making to forge an online sense of community. The new framework by guaranteeing risk-taking autonomy to teachers urges them to bring out their innovative best. When learning becomes self-directed, customized and differentiated steered by the enhanced role of technology in instruction, the teacher's role shifts proportionately from that of knowledge provider to that of a coach, mentor or discussion moderator offering the much-needed guidance and direction and feedback. Technology, in the hands of artful teachers, can be truly transformational. And, with great and inspiring teachers, blended learning can lead to even bigger and better outcomes at the same or still lower cost. The new learning dynamic, therefore, accentuates the value of specially curated professional development programmes for educational practitioners and support staff alike in the use of digital learning technologies to promote quality, uniqueness and consistency in students' experience.

By upholding freedom and flexibility a well-crafted and evidence-based blended solution makes learning flow seamlessly with minimum interruption in delivery. In-person and online components can be synthesized in any proportion to suit a student's personal learning style and adapt to their physical debilities, family situations and levels of technological access. Learning, in essence, is a continuous process that follows its learners everywhere. In cognizance of this NEP 2020, with a clear intent to liberate learning from erstwhile institutional confines, makes multiple entry and exit points available to learners. The Academic Bank of Credit is no less aspirational in its claim to empower students as key stakeholders by granting them enhanced autonomy to pick teachers and timings; choose creative course combinations; design degrees and diplomas; study through any mode with learning and examinations literally on demand and at will. Cultivating the right connections is fundamental to ensuring learning continuity in a shrinking and porous world. Technology, it is believed, will help draw teachers, students and peers closer besides squeezing the disciplinary/skill gaps. Contemporary internationalization drive in Indian higher education is embedded in the blending principle, one that seeks to integrate the institution and its key stakeholders with the global knowledge and learning network. In advancing the creation and exchange of new knowledge blended internationalization encourages the strengthening of the essential connection between students and their ideas across geographical, cultural and disciplinary borders by combining offline and online communication and networking.

With digital and social media influences pervading the lives of learners it is only natural that learning fuelled by ed-tech innovations goes digital. The post-pandemic blended future envisions the blossoming of students into culturally sensitive and globally competent citizens driven by a

growth mindset and an entrepreneurial spirit of continuous improvement. While technology can make potentially robust partners to both learners and educators, the success of this partnership will largely rely on 'what' the teacher chooses to do with technology and 'how' the students make use of technology to regulate their path, pace and place. The systemic inequities notwithstanding, hybrid learning equity approaches can fetch the country rich demographic dividends in the long run by allowing youngsters from across segments to chase their dreams uninhibited. Accessibility is key to integration. Hence, greater affordability and accessibility of quality online education are sure to unlock a range of livelihood opportunities in favour of the last and the lost. In the exceedingly diverse and low-resource Indian setting democratization of digital access is indispensable to making the big leap to a brighter tomorrow.