Impact of COVID-19 on Classroom Processes in Higher Education: A Student's Perspective

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Abstract

In the paper, the author shares her experiences of being a student enrolled in an institution of higher education and explores the impact of shift to remote learning as a result of COVID-19 outbreak on classroom processes such as engagement, assessment and physical environment of classroom. Since literature suggests that these processes have implications for learning outcomes of students, it is hoped that through such an inquiry, interventions for addressing the same can be identified.

Keywords: *classroom processes, higher education, COVID-19, India*

Introduction

December 2019 saw the beginnings of the COVID-19 outbreak. Initially restricted to parts of China and its neighbouring countries, the disease spread quickly across the world, with governments hastily enacting lockdown and quarantine restrictions (Crawford, et al., 2020). In India, as of 29 March 2020, only a few cases were reported (World Health Organization, 2020), leaving many concerned that the number of community-acquired cases were higher than those reported (Mansoor, 2020). The first phase of lockdown, thus, was announced pre-emptively to stop the spread on 25 March 2020, which continued till 14 April 2020. This was followed by three more phrases of lockdown (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). As a result of restrictions many educational institutions were forced to shift to online teaching and learning mode.

This had implications for students' learning outcomes. While it has shown to have helped in moving towards blended learning i.e., teaching methods that combine online educational materials with traditional place-based classroom methods (Jena, 2020). Preliminary data suggest that the pandemic has introduced new stressors for students like lack of food and safety, housing insecurities, etc., (American Psychological Association, 2020) and worsened learning outcomes for students at primary and secondary levels (Kuhfeld, et al., 2020).

Researches conducted At higher education level, researches have shown that confinement as a result of COVID-19 has had positive effects on students' performance by changing students learning strategies to continuous reading, thereby, improving their efficiency (Gonzalez, et al., 2020; Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). However, studies conducted in South Asian countries point towards increasing disparities in educational attainment and negative impact has been created due to lack of face-to-face interaction with the facilitator, and absence of traditional classroom socialization (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Jena, 2020).

Therefore, in this perspective paper, based on my experiences of being a student in an institution of higher education, an attempt has been made to explore how the classroom processes have been impacted as a result of remote learning. Literature emerging from areas of traditional classroom settings and distance learning, suggests that engagement (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998; Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006; Guthrie & Anderson, 1999), assessment (Cilliers, et. al., 2012; Scouller, 1998) and evolving physical environment of classrooms (Hannah, 2013) have implications for students' learning outcomes. Thus, the paper critically engages with these emerging themes.

Engagement

Engagement is defined as activities involving "active cognitive processes such as creating, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making, and evaluation" (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). Most classes across colleges in India have lecture method as a dominant pedagogical tool, as it allows substantial amounts of content to be delivered to a large audience. However, for transfer of factual information into usable knowledge there is a need for active engagement with the concept being delivered (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2004). For example, a study conducted by Schwartz et al. (1999), showed

that students who actively compared simplified data sets from schema experiments on memory and then heard a lecture around the topic performed much better on transfer test as compared to students who read and summarized a text on the topic of schema theory and then listened to a lecture or those who didn't receive a lecture at all.

In general, beyond the lecture method, students in traditional classroom setup can be seen engaging with content through three primary methods- reading and summarizing text, through interaction with teachers and peers, and fieldwork. As a result of the shift to online modality, while the avenue to read and summarize text continued to exist, the other aspects of classroom engagement were severely impacted.

Interaction with teachers- Since, the online medium is a synchronous learning platform the opportunities for interaction with the teachers continue to exist in classroom settings though virtually. These interactions might be compromised at either end due to network issues. Furthermore, in offline learning modality, there is space to approach the teacher post lecture to clarify doubts, and/ or to schedule appointments. However, due to changed scenarios teachers' devoted time which was the function of separate home and professional space has been deeply impacted, in lack of one's own room (Virginia Woolf) and increased commitment towards home (e.g., teachers who are also young parents may have to oversee their own children's schooling and fulfill child care responsibilities), the ability to find a time slot for engagement with the teacher outside a classroom has been critically compromised.

Interaction with peers- It has been observed that many students don't turn on their video while attending online classes, often due to bandwidth issues. The non-verbal communication, such as gestures and expressions, impacts the overall quality of classroom discussion. Furthermore, most students tend to log out immediately after class completion. Thereby losing the time for reflection on course content through peer interaction. This reduces spaces for scaffolding and peer learning. However, in order to overcome the same, practices like using co-working spaces in form of permanent google links wherein students can all collectively log in, mute themselves and work together, as well as study sessions wherein students can discuss course material can be adopted. However, the benefit of these practices may be restricted only to those who have undisrupted Wi-Fi and access to mobile/ computer for extended durations.

Fieldwork- The fieldwork is often conducted in the form of practical and internship that allows students to apply theoretical knowledge to real life situations. Which has been compromised in online modality. For example, those studying clinical psychology, the lack of in-person supervision for therapeutic interventions may reduce the attainment of key competencies required as practitioners (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Assessment

Assessment refers to "a process of documenting, in measurable terms, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs of the learner" (Capraro, Roe, Caskey, Strahan, & Bishop, 2012, p. 1). Assessment can be broadly classified as formative (i.e., assessment that occurs throughout college year) and summative (i.e., assessment that tries to capture the culmination of students' achievements within a specified time frame). Most college assessments in India have a combination of both assessments.

Following the shift to online modality, different colleges have adopted new models for assessment. University of Delhi adopted the Open Book Evaluation (OBE) for its final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students. Such assessment shifted the focus from evaluating rote memorization to testing students on more application-based questions. This can be seen as a positive step. However, it is important to note there should be a synergy between teaching and learning. While teaching modality with its increased dependence on lecture method continues to focus on rote memorization, the new evaluation criteria might be misaligned. Furthermore, it is important to ensure principles of fairness in evaluation. However, such new modalities raise questions of exclusion as students belonging SC, ST, OBC and economically weaker backgrounds may find it difficult to attend to such evaluations (Baruah, 2020).

Evolving physical environment of classrooms

Classroom setting is assumed to have an impact on students' learning outcomes. Due to the shift to online modality, instead of formal learning

spaces, students now log into their classroom through their homes. Increased distractions in terms of family members walking or talking in between classes may lead to disruption in ability to concentrate on the class. This issue may be further compounded for individuals who don't have separate rooms for themselves. Furthermore, instead of attending lectures in different locations, students now tend to attend lectures from a fixed space leading to experience of increased fatigue.

Concluding remarks

The shift to online modality has created new opportunities for innovation in classroom processes through use of blended learning and new forms of assessment. However, the new practices also raise issues of reduced engagement, lack of symmetry in learning and evaluation as well as disruptive classroom environments. Since these have implications for learning outcomes of students, it is hoped that the discussion undertaken above would help educators, administrators and the student body to come together to develop innovative solutions to tackle the same.

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