

Understanding School Students' Experiences of Online Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 has led to a number of changes in the educational scenario of India, including shift from face-to-face interaction with children in classroom to online interactions. However, the experiences of online learning have not been the same for all owing to the diverse socio-economic context of India. The present study is an attempt to understand the experiences of online learning at the secondary and senior-secondary school level in a metropolitan city, Delhi, through a brief online survey. Based on the responses of 52 students, the study found that even though teachers were trying hard to maintain the quality of the teaching-learning process, there were many other factors that affected the learning of students.

Keywords: *students' experiences, online learning, COVID-19*

Introduction

India witnessed a rise in COVID-19 cases by the end of March, which led the government to impose lockdown. The spread of virus affected almost every aspect of life including the economy, education, healthcare, and agriculture.

The government decided to close the schools and universities on 16th of March in an attempt to reduce the spread of coronavirus. The pandemic managed to disturb the routine functioning of the educational institutions all around the world. Even though the lockdown had been lifted, educational institutes have decided to continue with online classes.

The 21st century is marked by the advancement and use of technology. It has also seeped into the classrooms, where students are dependent more on the internet than libraries for their school projects and assignments. However, another reality is that every student does not have access to the internet and associated gadgets. Thus, it becomes of importance to relook at the current strategy of online classes. During the ongoing lockdown, as the transition from the traditional classroom learning to online learning took place, some people described it as a change that was needed for the modernization of the education system. They argued that the system will now be more accessible and flexible.

Another argument is that the system is not inclusive, especially for students with disability. Even for the people who can afford the said means, online education seems to be a mixed experience.

As the situation because of COVID-19 became graver with time, online education became the only alternative, seemingly for the whole year. The objective of this research stems from the situation created in education due to COVID and how the system was seemingly not prepared for it, especially students and their families.

Even though there are many newspaper articles and blogs related to online learning during COVID-2019, almost all of these are perspective-building articles, and not empirical studies. Considering that the issue of students' experiences of online learning during COVID-19 pandemic is a context specific issue, therefore, not many researches are available related to this topic. Though, there are numerous studies related to students' experience of online learning in general, some significant ones are discussed below.

A study by Blackmon and Major (2012) found that students enrolled into online courses to bring a balance in their time and energy between work, studies and family. However, it also reported that students also missed the classroom interactions with the teachers and batch mates. The lack of student-teacher and student-student communication has been a cause of concern for many students.

A study by Kemp and Grieve (2014) concerning undergraduates' opinions and test performance in classroom vs. online learning revealed that the students prefer face to face discussions rather than online discussions. The study further revealed that students preferred completing

written exercises online in the comfort of their homes and found online exams to be more flexible and easier.

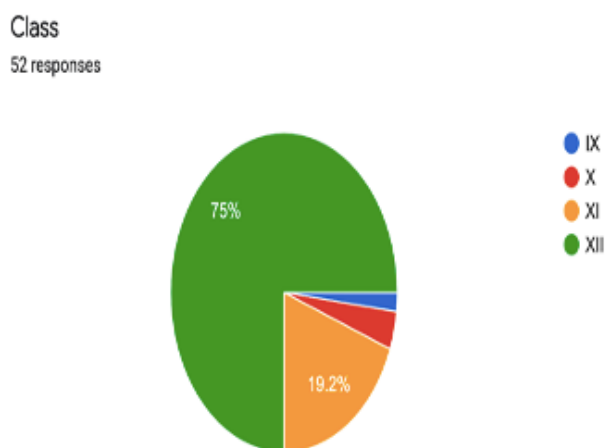
Students’ experiences of online learning during the pandemic were further looked into understanding the difference between online learning and classroom learning from students’ perspectives. The study examined various factors that influenced the online learning of students.

Method

The present study is a survey of opinions, feelings, and reflections of school students regarding online learning. The method adopted for this research is survey.

Participants for this study were students of class IX-XII. 52 students from tier 1 private schools in Delhi participated in this survey study and the distribution is presented in the figure below:

Chart 1: Grades in which the respondents’ study



Result and discussions

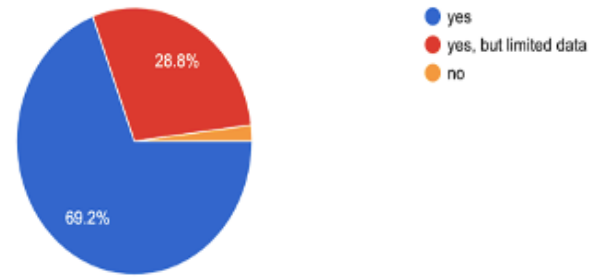
Based upon the responses of the participants, this section presents the results obtained from the data, its analysis and discussion. The first sub-section presents the analysis of closed-ended question and the second sub-section presents the analysis of open-ended questions.

The first and foremost question that arises in reference to online learning is whether students have an adequate internet connection to attend classes seamlessly. Responses to this question are presented below as Chart 2:

Chart 2: Responses to adequate internet connection to attend classes seamlessly

As can be seen from the pie-chart above, 69.2% students mentioned that they had adequate

Do you have an adequate internet connection to attend classes seamlessly?
52 responses

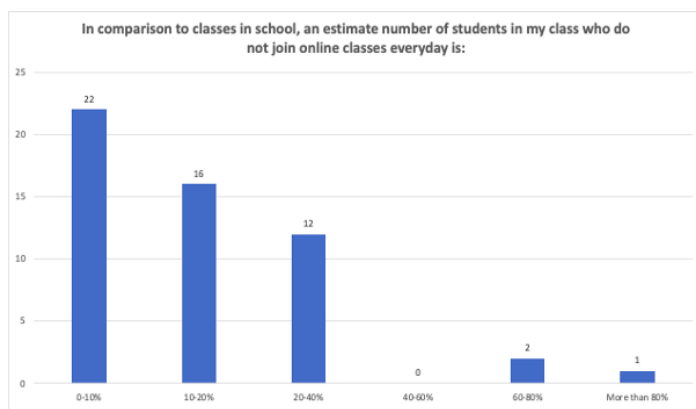


internet connection for classes, whereas 28.8% had a good-enough connection but with limited data. Only 2% students felt that they did not have an adequate internet connection. They also stated that even if they had good enough internet connection, the access was limited in terms of limited data availability. Hence, the data was over after one or two lectures or was not sufficient for all the lectures in a day. The responses clearly indicated towards a class-divide in terms of digital access, also known as digital-divide which has resulted in a difficult transition towards online learning. Participants also reported that the situation related to access to the internet for online classes became even more grave when there were two or more children in the house who needed to attend online lectures, but couldn’t due to limited or no internet availability, and lack of electronic gadgets such as smartphones, laptops and computers for each individual. Thus, students who did not have internet connection have fallen behind on their education during the pandemic. “The 2017-18 National Sample Survey reported only 23.8 percent of Indian households had internet access. In rural households (66 percent of the population), only 14.9 percent had access, and in urban households only 42 percent had access” (Sahni, 2020). This also raises questions of equity and universal access to education, especially in the times of a pandemic or any other natural disaster.

The next question was regarding the number of students who did not join online classes. Chart no. 3 depicts that 22 students reported that the estimated number of students who missed lectures every day is 0-10%. Along with access, the related issue that emerged from the survey was students’ motivation to attend online classes. Most of the classrooms in India consisted of 40-45 students, 10%, i.e., 4 students fail to attend lectures every day. Out of 52 students, 16

students reported that rate of absence in their classrooms is more than 20%.

Chart 3: Estimation of students missing online classes



One of the major challenges in online learning was to keep students motivated. During online lectures, students reported that they were more prone to disengagement. The absence of non-verbal cues also made students unenthusiastic. Students said that they first felt that online learning was simple and minimal engagement in the same will lead to the same results as face-to-face classroom learning. The absenteeism would also be less as compared to offline classrooms. But even if there was less absenteeism, students were attending classes with less concentration. Participants shared that they were falling behind on their lectures and schoolwork and were unable to catch up due to lack of communication with their peers. It, in turn, negatively impacted students' learning experience as well as their performance in classes.

Furthermore, even when there was access to the basic minimum requirements to attend an online class, there were other non-technical issues that affected the process of learning. Issues such as ethos to concentrate on learning, engaging with peers, and other learning resources. Chart 4, below, presents the views of the participants regarding their privacy and personal space while attending online classes.

Chart 4: Existence of space at home to attend online classes

Do you have a space where you can attend lectures and study without any disturbances? 52 responses

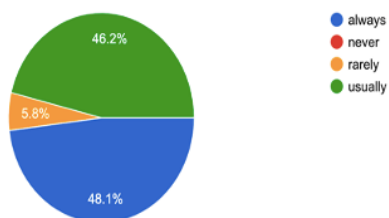
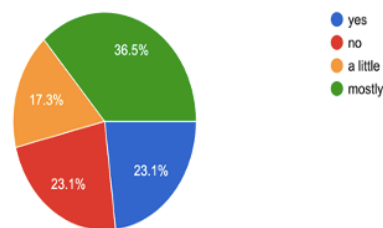


Chart 4 shows that about 48% students responded that they are always able to find a space where they can work undisturbed by their parents or other family members. Around 46% students noted that they usually have a personal space to study. Whereas, only about 6% students reported that they can rarely find enough quiet to keep their mental and physical state together while attending lectures. As a result, the learning process is not consistent and smooth. A peaceful space for one's own self while studying was an important factor that determined the concentration and attentiveness of the students. This was reported by most of the participants. This was affected by the ongoing activities at home and led to students not having a personal space for attending classes online and doing work allocated for after school hours. The absence of existence of a day that used to be a divided day- at school and after school, led to a diffused kind of situation at home. The lecture on the smartphone/computers and the conversations with or among the other members of the household at the same time created an attention divide in the students.

Chart 5: Responses to ability of students to concentrate in online classes

In comparison to your school class, were you able to properly concentrate on the lecture? 52 responses

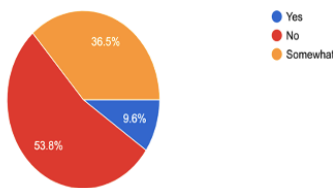


The next important concern for students is their concentration in online classes. As depicted in the Chart 5, when asked, "if they were able to concentrate during online lectures as well as classroom lectures?" 23 percent of the students in the sample reported that they were unable to concentrate properly on the online lectures. The students noted that they were constantly being distracted by other things going on in their smartphones, such as social media. About the same percentage of students i.e., 23 percent noted that they were able to easily concentrate during online classes. Another 36.5% students noted that they were mostly able to concentrate in the online classes, while another 17.3% students reported that they were only able to

concentrate a little during the online classes. These findings were quite intriguing as almost the same percentage of students said that they were able and unable to concentrate on the online lectures. Though the survey could not reveal the reasons for such a trend in the data, the factors affecting concentration of students in online classes may be worth considering in the subsequent studies.

Chart 6: Responses of online classes being more convenient to offline classroom lectures

Do you think that online classes are more convenient as compared to classroom lectures at your school?
52 responses

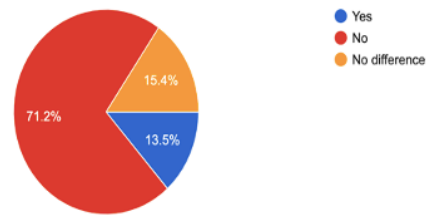


Apart from ability to concentrate, another pertinent point that was explored in the survey was convenience of online classes. As can be seen from Chart 6, most students, i.e. about 54 percent of students, reported that they found online classes inconvenient as compared to the classroom lectures. About 36 percent of students noted that online classes were somewhat more convenient as compared to the classroom lectures while about 10 percent of students were convinced that online classes were definitely more convenient than classroom lectures. Thus, it is quite clear that online classes were not as convenient as going to school for most students. It could be because of lack of dedicated space for learning at home, absence of adequate internet connection and existence of general disturbances at home. The students who reported finding online classes more convenient mentioned reasons such as considerations of commuting long distance to reach the school.

Chart 7: Responses to understand nature of learning with online classes

The survey further explored the issue of effectiveness to understand if students were able to learn equally well with online classes. As can be observed from Chart 7, a miniscule 13% of students in the sample found online classes more effective than classroom lectures. 15.4% students found no difference and the rest 71.2% of students in the sample clearly reported finding

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52 responses

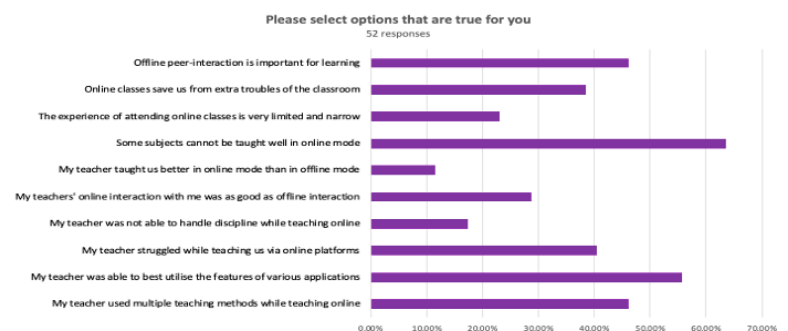


classroom lectures much more effective as compared to the online classes. The reasons for the same were multifold. Multiple reasons reported for ineffectiveness to learn well from online classes were sitting at the same place the whole day and listening to lectures creates a monotonous environment, unavailability of resources at home, especially for persons with disabilities, such as Braille printers or support of a special educator, noise at home arising from cooking or doorbell or conversations among people at home.

As is notable from Chart 8, when enquired if they observed any difference in the teaching method of teachers in online mode, about 20% students felt that teachers have not changed much in their ways of teaching. A majority of students, i.e., about 44% of students, suggested that there were only minor changes in the pedagogy. About 36% students noted that there were significant changes in the teaching methods used by teachers in online lectures.

The change in the teaching methods employed by teachers in online teaching seemed to be a positive trend, but, when probed further students did mention that the changed methods were not enough to sustain their concentration for a particular class in online mode.

Chart 9: Responses for beliefs of students with respect to online learning and experiences with



teachers in online learning mode

Participants were further asked about their beliefs with respect to online learning and their experiences with teachers in online learning mode. About half of the students (about 46.2%) believed that offline peer-interaction is important for learning. This seemed to be the biggest casualty in the whole process of online learning and contributor to the disengagement of students. When asked if online classes saved students from the extra troubles of the classroom, only about 38% students agreed. This indicated that there are very few students who see online classes as a viable substitute for an actual classroom despite its usual troubles. Few students (i.e., about 23%) believed that their experience of attending online classes is limited and narrow. The rest of the students found online learning enriching.

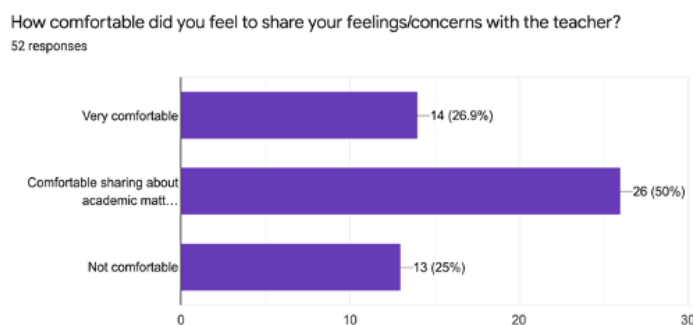
In reference to the possibilities of online learning, the majority of students (i.e., about 64%) agreed that there were limitations to online learning as some subjects just can't be taught in the online mode. When asked if their teacher taught better in online mode as compared to the offline mode, only about 11% of students agreed. This indicated that most students believed that their teachers did a better job of teaching in a regular face to face classroom scenario than in online mode. About less than half (i.e., 46%) students reported that their teachers used multiple methods while teaching in the online classroom.

In reference to the experiences with teachers, only a few students (i.e., 29%) believed that their interaction with them in online mode was as good as offline mode. Most of the students felt that the quality of interaction with the teachers was better in actual classroom and school. About 40% students in the survey also expressed that their teachers struggled in using the different online platforms. Further, about half of the students (i.e., about 55%) believed that their teachers were able to utilize the different features of the online learning applications.

The discussion above indicates that online mode of teaching does not offer students an interpersonal space where they could open up and engage with the teacher and with each other. This idea was further explored in the next question where students were asked if they felt comfortable while sharing their concerns and feelings with the teachers in the online classes. As depicted in Chart 10, only about 25%

students reported feeling comfortable in sharing their feelings and concerns with the teacher in the online mode. Equal percentage of students reported that they felt uncomfortable with the same and felt that they were able to share and discuss multiple aspects about themselves with teachers in offline mode. About 50% of students mentioned that they only feel comfortable discussing the academic matters with their teachers in the online mode and not personal issues.

Chart 10: Responses about sharing concerns/feelings with teachers in online mode



For the purpose of analysis, the following broader categories of few (under 30%), many (30-50%), most (50-80%), and almost all (above 80%) have been used, wherever needed. The questions were not mandatory for the respondents to respond.

While exploring the support of family for online learning, most of the respondents replied that their family members do not disturb them during their studies. They are provided with a separate space, privacy, as well as necessary peace to attend a class online. A few mentioned that their parents sit with them during the classes. Only two students mentioned that their parents do not find any value in online classes but still supported them fully.

On being asked what participants considered important in school life, but found it missing during online learning, most of the students responded that they missed being with friends, having fun with their peers, meeting teachers, and other classroom interactions. Only a few students missed physical activities, practical learning, and a daily routine. The responses of students clearly indicated the importance of their peer-group and other aspects of the school life that made offline classroom a more wholesome experience.

With reference to improving their learning in online classes, many students mentioned that use of presentations, quizzes, research activities, and individual attention to students can be helpful. A few respondents mentioned that more discipline on the part of students, counselling sessions, one on one interaction are required. A few students also mentioned that recordings of the sessions need to be made available and sessions need to be made more interesting.

Many respondents felt that online assessments should be done, but only during emergency times, such as lockdowns. Most of the respondents did not support online assessments because of issues of access, loopholes such as possibility of use of unfair means, application malfunction or software glitches, and would not include any practical work. A few respondents also mentioned that online assessments of younger students would not be easy. When asked what kind of interactions would help participants to learn better in online classes, many students shared that they did not think that anything else could help them learn better in online classes. Only a few students felt that better teacher-student interaction, individualized attention, and projects or quizzes might help.

More number of students felt their relationship with their teachers has changed now. They felt that the change was in terms of reduced quality of interaction. Of those who feel that teachers have not changed, only one student mentioned that their teachers still focused on the students who scored more marks. Many respondents did not give reasons for their responses.

Most respondents felt that their relationships with their peers had changed negatively because of reduced interaction while attending online classes. This may also be due to not being able to meet their friends daily. Only a few felt that there was no change in their relationships with their peers.

Of the challenges that the respondents faced while attending classes online, most of them reported internet breakdown or slow internet as the main reason. A few of them also reported headaches, irritation in eyes, inattentiveness, lack of concentration, less time to clear doubts, and issues with sitting for long hours. A few of them also felt that certain practical concepts were not easy to be understood in an online classroom.

In comparison to their online classes, most students felt that other spaces apart from classes are equally important. Many respondents found that physical activities in schools are important. The importance of friendships, institutional ethos, discipline, going out of one's comfort zone and a constant engagement with teachers are aspects that are amiss in online learning.

As can be discerned from the discussion above, both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the survey complement each other. Some insights which are missing from the quantitative section of the discussion are provided by the qualitative analysis of participants' responses to open-ended questions in the survey. Yet, there are many unexplored ideas which could have been explored in-depth with help of an interview with some participants.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the study provides us with an overview of the experiences of online learning of students from urban metropolitan privately managed schools. Even though there was a lot of similarity in the context of these schools, yet there are many differences in students' experiences. As far as the commonalities are concerned, many students reported the lack of proper communication between the students and the teacher as well as among the students. Students expressed that the lectures were mostly one way, where only the teachers spoke for half an hour without any interaction with the students. The lack of excitement about classrooms caused boredom and in turn, caused low levels of concentration.

Most students disclosed that even though they understood that online classes are the best option that they have during the ongoing crisis, they, along with their parents, did not prefer online classes over regular classroom classes. The reason for this was limited classroom interaction among peers, lack of feeling of connect of the students with the teachers, no physical activity, no lunch breaks and associated merriment, no sense of healthy competitions, joy of school academic and non-academic festivities and the general ambience of the classroom and the school. They felt that all the above aspects were very helpful in inculcating a sense of unity and willingness to learn in a student. Maximum students suggested that regular classes were

more convenient and effective as compared to online lectures.

Participants believed that practical knowledge that they gained in schools through projects, debates, reflections, games, workshops, brainstorming etc. foster learning. One of the major sources of inconvenience as revealed by the participants was online assessment of students which they felt was unfair. In schools, teachers understand and cater to the different needs of different students which seems impossible during online lectures, even though teachers were trying their best to incorporate aspects of individualized attention to students.

The healthy and casual conversations not related to books, which lightened the mood of a classroom seemed to be missing from the picture and made lectures tedious. Even if students came up with queries or topics of discussion, the duration of the lecture was not enough for the

teachers to respond to queries. Hence, students were reluctant to voice their doubts. The teachers also strictly stick to the curriculum and what was there in the books that it barely left any space and time for creativity. Most of the teachers were not familiar with the functioning of gadgets and hence they struggled with the same. It usually took a lot of time for everyone to join in on lectures in time, which left very little time in hand for actual engagement with a topic in a particular lecture, let alone using multiple methods such as videos, PowerPoint presentations, films, etc. to aid education. Online classes demanded a lot from the family as well.

It can be concluded that though the online classes are the need of the hour, but they cannot replace the face-to-face classes. The classroom interactions lead to a more holistic development and learning of a child.

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