Experiences of Teachers in Online Classes during COVID

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Abstract

Overnight everything changed for us. Teachers had to move from traditional means to online mode with use of technology to an extent that was never done before. From seeing the bright faces in the class every day to now just initials like BK, AJ appearing on the screen. A challenge was thrown open to teachers. How to conduct classes online? Teachers learnt to use technology and they had to adapt to the change overnight. Zoom, Microsoft teams, Google meet various platforms were being tried and used during this period. Teachers responded well. The paper shares the case vignettes of online teaching experiences of teachers teaching different subjects. The challenges faced by teachers, how they overcame them and the means they adopted to make their classes exciting have been discussed in the paper.

Keywords: *online teaching, teachers' experiences, virtual tours, virtual labs, technology*

Introduction

Amidst these times of global pandemic and rising apprehensions, teachers continue with the efforts of imparting knowledge and holistic learning. The sudden shift from face-to-face teaching, greeting and meeting all students and peers, daily routine of hustle bustle came to a halt one morning. The scenario changed to distant learning mode for the students. Nonetheless, the mentors decided to gear up and continue with the new medium of virtual classroom teaching. With the new apps being downloaded, they adapted themselves to this new way of interaction with students and the efforts put for this transition were commendable.

Teaching in the new-normal

Mupinga (2005) in his concluding remarks saw the virtual school market expanding due to shortage of teachers, overcrowding facilities and geographical and monetary barriers. Today, schools had to go virtual due to none of the above reasons, but a virus. The debate on use of technology and online mode of education in the school system has been on since more than two decades. Educational policies of nations across the globe have been strongly recommending use of ICT in curriculum and for teaching. Fabry and Higgs (1997), suggested that, "teachers must make two radical changes—they must learn how to use technology and they must fundamentally change how they teach."

COVID-19 did not give time for teachers to learn how to use technology and how to change their methodology. Overnight, teachers were expected to hold online classes, learn the use of technology as well as use methodologies best suited for online teaching. Teachers struggled from zoom to Microsoft teams to google meet, schools tried various platforms and after a month or two settled with one of the many platforms available. There were issues related to students' behaviour and teachers did not seem to be in control of the class. The young generation is definitely more tech savvy than some decade old teachers. There were reports of students muting the teacher, removing other students from the meeting, writing on the whiteboard when the teacher was explaining and presenting their own screen. Also, there were others who were not part of the class but were able to join the meeting, thus making it an issue of cyber security. Each platform also quickly started updating depending on the needs of the school. Now, things seemingly were improving with time. Soon teachers learnt new techniques to again be in charge of the class. Teachers were able to control who enters their class, who presents and now the technological control was with the teachers. The classes were becoming smooth with teachers learning and adapting to the *new normal.*

There have been reports of problems faced by teachers during online teaching. Teachers were required to put in double the efforts in their work as a lot of preparation was required to conduct classes. PowerPoint presentations were required, searching for videos or making own videos for

each and every topic was required. Teachers were stressed out with the increased workload. Mathematics and Science teachers found it difficult to explain concepts and solve problems online. They tried many methods like solving questions beforehand and took screenshots which were explained stepwise during the online class. Many Mathematics teachers came back to chalk and board methods. They after experimenting with a number of ways started using whiteboards and their phone or laptop camera to present the content. Much like the classroom earlier on, with one major difference- students were virtually present. Science teachers faced problems with practical sessions. Experiments were difficult to conduct. Every subject teacher had their set of problems.

A Mathematics teacher shared his story, "When suddenly the classes went online, as a Maths teacher I was in a messed-up situation. We were to use zoom. I scheduled my classes and was all set to take up the challenge. I started with holding my phone in one hand and with another wrote on a sheet of paper. It was very tiring and ineffective as my hand that held the phone (camera) was not stable. I tried to search on the internet for solutions and spoke to my colleagues. Some suggested use of PowerPoint and videos so I resorted to that. But even after all my efforts, my students were not satisfied as due to connectivity issues the videos were suspended, I was unable to share audio of the videos and to add to my troubles was the 'screen share' using which students played inappropriate videos. I had to suddenly call off the class (meeting). Many other teachers faced similar problems so we had an extensive training on security features and how to control the meeting. These training were conducted every evening and we had classes in the morning. Learning new security features helped me control the class. I was now the host and was able to control the class. Then our school planned to shift to Microsoft Teams. Again, we had training and shifted to teams. Now, I was able to organize meetings with settings to control my class. Even on teams I continued to share my screen and discuss the solution of questions stepwise. I was not satisfied. Then I started using a whiteboard and moved to the conventional method. The teaching is not satisfying. I am not able to connect with my students."

Study of 13 teachers from four online schools in Alberta, Canada by Muirhead (2000) showed that online teachers have experienced increased workloads. All teachers who were interviewed talked about increased workload. They were concerned about inability to connect well with students. Teachers were unable to identify who all had understood the concept and who needed help. Students had connectivity issues and sometimes also made excuses when asked a question, that they were unable to see, hear or unmute themselves. To add to all the troubles was conducting exams online. Many platforms had been tried and every platform had some advantages and some disadvantages. What further created trouble for the teachers was frequent change in use of technology. Initially, all subjective papers were being mailed or sent by WhatsApp to teachers, now the 'turn in' option in Teams was being used where all papers were available together at one place. Correcting these papers was very difficult as checking on screen increased screen time.

Yes, there have been numerous difficulties faced by teachers as well as students during online classes. These have been talked about much at various platforms. Stress and mental health issues have risen due to lack of interaction. Students are disinterested, report difficulty in understanding, face network issues and do not feel connected with their peers and teachers. Do we have any positives from these online classes?

The teachers who dreaded the use of computers and were more comfortable with hand-written work than using Excel or PowerPoint initially thought they would not be able to cope with this sudden change. According to Hargreaves (1992) and Jones (2004), teachers' readiness is the key to success of online programs. If teachers were skeptical about use of technology, they would be reluctant towards online teaching. In the present situation, forced teachers to resort to use of technology in absence of any other solution. Now they found online mode easy and useful, thanks to the pandemic. One teacher shared her story, she narrated- She used to shy away from use of technology and always took help of her children or husband for such work. When the pandemic forced schools to close, she had to resort to online teaching mode. She learnt how to use the online teaching platform, when there was no other choice left. She quoted, "I love to be with children, online classes have taken away

that wonderful experience of being one of them. Still, technology has helped us be in touch. The classes are going on regularly, curriculum is being followed and when the students and I feel like talking, we just turn on our cameras and chat our hearts out."

Despite similar concerns, Social Science teachers mentioned use of PowerPoints and videos helped making connections and presentation of the content easier. The ease to use videos and quick short research was cited as an interesting aspect of online teaching. With improvement in technology and features provided by platforms like zoom, meet and teams, it became convenient for teachers to use videos as a resource. Virtual tours to different places, galleries and museums gave students a chance to explore. This had been possible with the new technology, during this new normal situation.

When we talk of Science, we think of many hands-on activities and experiments. The apprehension of not being able to conduct practicals made science teachers think out of the box and use material available at home to conduct experiments. Extraction of DNA, Tyndall effect, chromatography using newspaper, to mention a few, were done at home by students. Science teachers also explored OLabs and other virtual labs and conducted online lab classes. Students performed experiments, noted down observations and drew inferences. Like a normal lab session, only without physically touching the material and apparatus, everything was done virtually. The simulations available online on platforms like PhET. These simulations took the students to the molecular level to explain behaviour of particles. The simulations on gas laws where students could change values of pressure, temperature and volume to study the relationship between these variables for gases and many such simulations scaffold student understanding. These experiments were not possible in labs but the simulators are a helpful tool.

DiPietro et al. (2008,16–27) identified teachers' actions to make online classes effective. These included experimenting with new technologies and improving their technological skills, motivating students online and connecting with them through various modes. Teachers in this new normal have adopted all these means.

Schools have adapted well to the current situation. Teachers have shown remarkable resilience. When the lockdown was announced in India, the new session was to start. Teachers were allotted a new set of classes. It takes time to bond with students in a normal classroom, but teachers have wonderfully bonded to the new set of students whom they have never met in person. Teachers are not just conducting classes, inter school and intra school competitions, prize distribution ceremonies, student council formation, assemblies, special assemblies, PTM (Parent Teachers' Meeting), unit tests, terminal examination, practical classes, report cards distribution, everything that forms a part of the normal school calendar is happening! VIRTUALLY ....

There are many takeaways. Shifting to online mode has made it possible, for schools, to break boundaries. Participants or guests can be present in events from anywhere on earth. Technology has made inter school events go beyond small regions, online a student from a school in Kerala or Assam can participate in quiz, debate or any other competition being held by a school in Delhi. Travel is not required; you just need good connectivity. We have become a global society in a true sense. Teachers have adapted and adopted technology. Though online assessment has its drawbacks, a quick assessment of the topic taught is possible with Google forms and you get immediate responses and analysis of data. Teachers can immediately after teaching the topic, post a few questions and get feedback. In case previous understanding is to be tested, a few questions will help teachers identify grey areas of class as a whole and individual student with a click of a button.

Conclusion

There is an innovation involved in teaching, which has peaked during the pandemic. All activities, clubs, competitions and webinars are planned and administered virtually, with efficacy. Finally, a new mode has been set in, that is dependent on just a click of the button. The satisfaction and optimism that teachers can keep the children engaged and engrossed despite a no in -person interaction, gives great contentment. But school is being missed.

Noisy corridors, chitter-chatter in the classroom, challenging each other in the playground and the school is being missed by students as well as

teachers. Emotional bonding between peers and teachers is missing. Transaction of curriculum virtually is not completely possible. It misses the human touch. However, once we are back to physical school, the advantages of the virtual world should not be forgotten. A blended program, classroom transactions and online mode, will facilitate learning. Teaching–the learning process will not be the same post COVID. Teachers will use the technology they learnt and used during COVID times to improvise their teaching methodologies.

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