

Acceleration of Virtual Learning: A Great Leap in Academia amidst Covid-19 Outbreak

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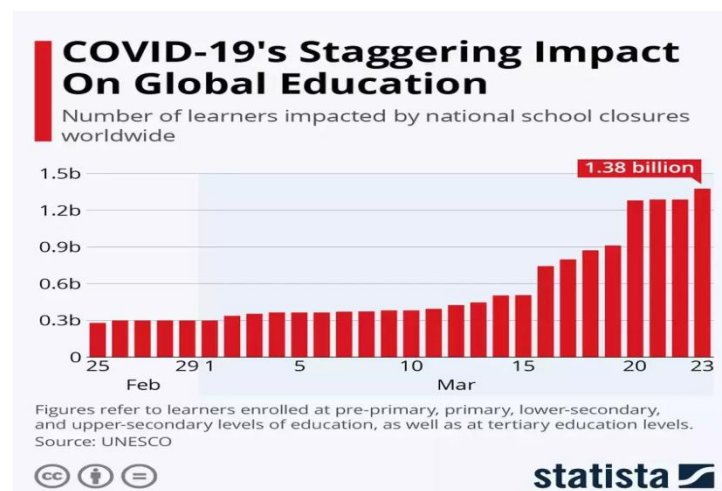
Abstract

The entire world is subjected to severe pandemic crisis named Covid-19 with thousands of deaths every day, and with so many other serious issues like decline in the economy, massive restriction of normal lives etc., On the other hand, teaching and learning has taken new dimension with innumerable opportunities as well as challenges to be explored which this paper attempts to highlight at its best.

Key Words: *Virtual Learning, E-learning, Technology, Online Tools, Pandemic, Covid-19*

Introduction

The wide spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has left the entire human fraternity across globe to lead their lives behind their doors without any business or social involvements and over 1.2 billion students of 158 countries have been affected by the closure of educational institutions. Contradiction to the existing situation, teaching and learning has entered into a new world with the aid of innovative technologies and challenges in its belt. Even before the Covid - 19 outbreak, the growth of edtech investments had reached up to US\$18.66 billion in 2019 and can be expected more in the upcoming years. Though technology has rapidly occupied the academic field over a decade to the maximum extent, Covid-19 lockdown has taken this process of teaching and learning to the next phase in virtual learning which is entirely new for both the teachers as well as for the student community.



Various Online Platforms

Learning amidst of the pandemic is productive with the availability of abundant resources in the web, and also through several other online platforms that connects people and makes their learning process a possible one in this uncertain situation. In order to ensure learning possible during this lockdown, The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has provided many opportunities to learn variety of subjects staying home from the National Digital Library through which students can access books and other study materials for free. Similarly, NPTEL, the leading online learning portal in India has offered online certification courses for students, research scholars and faculty members of all domains in providing free special lectures by experts. In the same way, Libraries and many publishing houses across the globe has provided free access of resources in online to ensure learning a possible and productive one.

Some district schools have made unique partnerships to provide broadcasts through special channels for various age groups and in different range of digital options. Popular broadcasting Media organizations are also providing virtual learning such BBC. Bitesize Daily, launched by BBC on 20th April is offering fourteen weeks of curriculum-based lessons for kids across United Kingdom.

Though there are many sources available free in online, learning cannot be complete without the guidance of experienced teachers and professional experts for which face to face live interactions along with the lectures have become an important requirement. When compared with the real classroom, the face to face interaction is limited which becomes the main shortcoming of a virtual classroom. To overcome this hurdle, the use of various online platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, CISCO Webex etc., has enabled the learners to get connected in live sessions with their tutor through which they can have an effective learning. Being reliable online platforms, these applications are used to conduct classes every day for school, college and university students. The students can attend classes from their home by using their computer or smart phone which is more convenient and easy in the process of learning. While taking classes, teachers can present PPT slides on the screen which further helps the students to prepare the subjects in a better manner.

Different types of communication and Communication tools

E-Learning separates the learners by time and space so the utilization of communication tools becomes an essential part. There are two types of communication namely synchronous and asynchronous. The major advantage of synchronous communication tools is that it facilitates in real time collaboration which enables one-on-one or group communication. The other advantages of synchronous communication are students tend to expose social skills in turn results in effective engagement and learning. The other side of coin i.e. disadvantages are difficulties in controlling a large classroom and poor internet connection can also act as a negative factor in effective learning. The different synchronous communication tools are as follows

1. video conferencing – It works on real time interaction where the class to some extent seems like an conventional classroom
2. Audio conferencing- It works with lag of visuals and the discussion is limited to a small group.
3. Web conferencing- It allows the sharing documents, presentations and application demonstration in a real time interaction.
4. White boarding – It refers to the use of white boards in order to share files and demonstrations with minimal efforts and cost.
5. Live Chat- It allows the instructor to share their screen in real time, documents and also enables interaction with the students.

All these communicative tools have their own advantages and disadvantages. And none of the communicative tools can be considered as completely advantageous.

The advantage of asynchronous communication tools is the availability of lessons anywhere and anytime which provides enough time for the students to study and reflect on the topics. The various asynchronous communications tools are discussion forums, social media messaging, web logs and e-mail messaging the major. The disadvantages of employing asynchronous communication are irregular participation of the students, lazy students copying assignments from internet, and delay in getting feedbacks.

Blog – A Finer Learning Tool in Academic Realm

A blog is an online platform where an individual or group of individuals can easily share contents or upload images with unlimited number of people on the internet. It can be easily created in low cost with the abundant availability of modern technology. In academic learning, blogs can act as mindful/cognitive tool where the students will receive space for feedbacks and learning, and also encounter a social interaction with new audience. It can act as creative space, critical dissection of information, shares ideas and theories, and to write homework where the other members of the class will be able to leave comments and questions based on the content shared. And this will lead to the higher probability in the development of creative thinking, writing skill, analytical skills and socially included feeling while sharing responses on the reflections of the contents.

Students Assessment in Virtual Learning

Apart from lectures provided through several applications, teachers can post materials and give assignment using Google classroom which also helps the teachers to assess the level of each student. Assessment is defined as “the systematic collection, review, and the use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development.” (*Palombra & Banta*). The assessment is not a single variable or strands of evaluation rather it is multi layered evaluation which is used for further effective teaching. The most important purpose of assessing students is to track the development of their learning process of the students. With the assessments, teachers can give constructive feed backs to the students and help them in effective learning process in future. Despite many advantage of online learning and assessments, it has its own disadvantages. The disadvantages are as follows:

1. Time consumption for the preparation of tests
2. Technological investments such as soft wares and hard wares
3. The instructors can't monitor the students and students tend to take up tests anytime of their choice and convenience.
4. Network (poor connection) and server issues.

Virtual Learning and Tools - A boon

The Covid-19 outbreak has become a boon for academicians, due to which a large number of fruitful opportunities are extensively used in online through various means of applications like you tube channel, face book live, and other online video call applications such as Zoom, Google Meet etc., To ensure productive learning, Universities, Research Centers and other academic forums are providing large number of opportunities for faculty members, research scholars and students by organizing Webinars, online conferences, online workshops, Faculty Development Programs and online certification courses. In which learners get wide range of opportunities to update themselves in the respective fields through active listening, discussions and presentation of Research articles.

Advantages and Disadvantages of E-Learning

Despite the advancement in innovations and benefits in digital learning, there are some serious challenges that should be taken into consideration as well. It is a fact that all the students are not in the position to own a good technical gadget and some of them might not have any of gadgets like mobile or laptop. The students those don't who possess a mobile or computer is losing the opportunity to learn further even though they are capable enough. The most important issue is that the students often face poor network connection in their place which becomes a hurdle for them to be active in the virtual class.

The most important challenge that every teacher happens to face during virtual classes is that the lack of face to face interaction. In the real classroom, when teacher is amidst students, he/ she can definitely monitor the absent minded students and the slow learners. But in a virtual classroom setup, it is highly impossible for the teacher to concentrate individually on each student and in fact the teacher cannot read the minds of the students. In order to overcome this issue, teacher must be mentally prepared and suppose to involve himself/herself in discussion during the class. And also, the quick turn in the platforms can be a disrupting curriculum, particularly for teachers less equipped to work on internet and gadgets.

Summing up

This shift away from classroom to E-learning in most of the parts of the globe has higher probabilities of continuation even after the post-pandemic era. Once when this viral spread subsides, there will be shift from online classroom to traditional classroom which might cause some disruptions and adjusting back will be a challenging one for both teachers and learners.

And hopefully, this phase of academic learning is a fruitful one, and also will serve as a preparation for future uncertainty. This viral pandemic has acted as an important impact factor in taking a great leap in the virtual learning despite its short comings and disadvantages.

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