



News Editorials (22 Jan, 2021)

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Digital Education: Learning amid the Pandemic

This article is based upon “**Digital Education cannot Substitute for Real Learning**” which was published in The Times of India on 21/01/2021. It talks about how the pandemic has completely shifted the present education system into a digital mode of learning and if it is actually substituting real learning or not.

The **Covid-19** outbreak has disrupted children’s lives, pushed out many, and stalled classes and examinations across the country. To ensure students do not miss out on studies, schools shifted the classes to online mode.

With the **pandemic** forcing the teaching and learning process to migrate to the online mode, the education system has faced an upheaval like never before. Many of the students have been left clinging to their phones and computer screens.

However, the 2017-18 **National Sample Survey** suggested that less than 15% of rural Indian households have Internet as opposed to 42% of their urban counterparts.

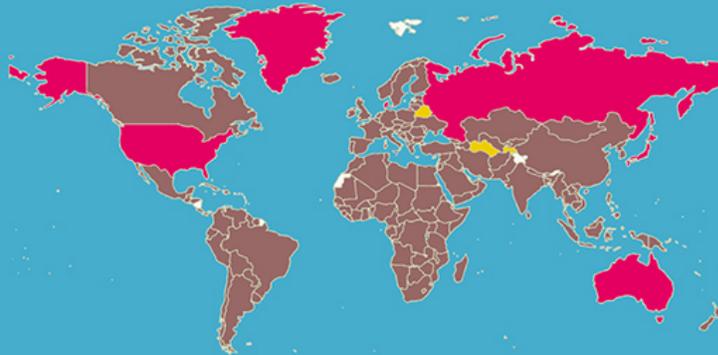
Therefore, this shift to the e-learning system has sparked a debate on whether it helped the students to learn or has impeded their progress, social and emotional well-being, and more importantly if this is indeed education.

Digital Education

Digital education is the innovative use of digital tools and technologies during teaching and learning and is often referred to as Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) or e-Learning.

Exploring the use of digital technologies gives educators the opportunity to design engaging learning opportunities in the courses they teach, and these can take the form of blended or fully online courses and programs.

The **COVID-19** pandemic has interrupted classroom learning for at least **9** out of **10** students worldwide



191 countries have closed all their schools, affecting over **1.5 billion** students from pre-primary to tertiary education

● Localized ● Country-wide ● Open

Government Initiatives for Smooth Conduct of E-Learning

- Several initiatives have been taken to enable online education in India, such as:
 - **E-PG Pathshala:** An initiative of the Ministry of Human Resource Development to provide e-content for studies.
 - **SWAYAM:** it provides for an integrated platform for online courses.
 - **NEAT:** It aims to use **Artificial Intelligence** to make learning more personalized and customized as per the requirements of the learner
- Other initiatives include: **National Project on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)**, **National Knowledge Network, (NKN)**, and National Academic Depository (NAD), among others.
- **PRAGYATA:** The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) released guidelines on **digital education** titled **PRAGYATA**.
 - Under the PRAGYATA guidelines, only 30 minutes of screen time per day for interacting with parents is recommended for kindergarten, nursery and pre-school.
 - Schools can hold live online classes for a maximum of 1.5 hours per day for Classes 1-8, and 3 hours per day for Classes 9-12.

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning

- The NPTEL is a project of MHRD initiated by seven Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), along with the Indian Institute of Science Bangalore.
- It was created in 2003 to provide online education.
- The aim was to have web and video courses in engineering, sciences, and management.

Technology as a Saviour

- **Flexibility:** Online education enables both the teacher as well as the students to set their own learning pace plus provides the flexibility of setting a schedule that fits everyone's agenda. Consequently, providing a better work-study balance.
- **A Wide Range of Courses:** In a space as vast and wide as the internet, infinite skills and subjects are there to teach and learn.
 - A growing number of universities and higher education schools are coming forward to offer online versions of their programs for various levels and disciplines.
- **More Cost-Effective than Conventional Learning:** Lesser monetary investment is there with better results.
 - With the online mode of learning, the money spent on study materials along with commute charges is considerably less.
- **A Comfortable Learning Environment:** Online learning allows students to work in the environment that best suits them.

The Other Side of the Coin

- **Lack of a Healthy Learning Environment:** Education is not just about classes but interactions, broadening of ideas, and free-flowing open discussions.
 - Students learn more from each other while engaging in challenging collective tasks and thinking together.
 - There is substantial learning that is lost when education goes online. Staring at a screen prevents them from using their mind and acting as remote receptors of what is beamed.
- **Lack of Technology Access:** Not everyone who can afford to go to school can afford to have phones, computers, or even a quality internet connection for attending classes online.
 - Due to this, the mental stress that students have to undergo is very high.
- **In Contradictory with Right to Education:** Technology is not affordable to all, shifting towards online education completely is like taking away the **Right to Education** of those who cannot access the technology.
 - Moreover, the **National Education Policy** that talks about the digitization of education is also in contradiction with the right to education.
- **Health - Eye issues:** Younger students, especially in classes 1 to 3 were most likely to suffer from eye-health issues due to staring at the computer or mobile screen for extended periods.
 - Other health issues like neck and back pain etc. due to bad posture and lack of movement have been noticed in older students.

Way Forward

- **A Multi-Pronged Approach:** Flexible rescheduling the academic timetable and exploring options in collaboration with schools, teachers, and parents for providing access to education to a larger section of students.
 - Staggering teacher-student interactions in physical mode with not more than 50% of the total strength attending schools on alternate days.
 - Giving priority to the less advantaged students who do not have access to e-learning.
 - Genuine efforts must be invested to ensure every child gets good quality equitable education as a fundamental right.
- **Making Online Education More Effective:** Shorter but quality discussions rather than long hours of monotonous sitting and one-way communication, should be preferred.

The teacher's role has to go beyond just being in control of the class to being a facilitator for the transfer of knowledge.
- **Focussing more on Knowledge Aspect:** Education is not about competence but more about motivation. The students are meant to discover not just cover the syllabus.

The system should not just heartlessly push the students and teachers in only finishing the course regardless of any gain of knowledge, stress should be upon quality learning and not quantity cramming.

Conclusion

'Equality of Opportunity' is one of the basic principles of the Indian Constitution. Shifting to a system that benefits only a section of people and leaves behind the neediest ruins the very notion of this statement.

Moreover, digital education is something where India is not successful yet. There is still a lot to do in terms of checking if students' entitlements are not being compromised or in providing meaningful academic curriculum alternatives.

Drishti Mains Question

Shifting to the e-learning system has sparked a debate about whether it has made education more inclusive or widened the digital divide. Discuss.

This editorial is based on "**President Biden: Hope And Responsibility**" published in The Economic Times on January 21th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.