

6-1-2022

Can Blended Learning Address Indian Academic Issues?

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Recommended Citation

Joshi, Vijay and Baral, Sukanta K. (2022) "Can Blended Learning Address Indian Academic Issues?" *International Review of Business and Economics*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/irbe/vol7/iss1/3>

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1. Introduction

The Pandemic has put limits to India's education development (India Today, 2020) [1], (Jena, 2020) [2]. Over the years, India has implemented social reforms aimed at providing education to all. This is observed from the growth in GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) over the years that has resulted in a decrease in the number of students absent in schools. Coronavirus has affected the learning mechanism which is the core of any 'education'. This has become a challenge to be tackled by all. Indeed, this is testing the functions, efficiencies, and practices of India's schooling framework. Coronavirus is affecting the learning of almost 320 million students in the country. It is required that the education sector must incorporate changes and innovations so that they may impart education to the needy by different methods. A wider acceptance of 'social distancing' rules has resulted in the use of contact-less teaching methods such as online meetings but not all people are getting used to it. Besides this, there are several other reasons for the non-acceptance of the same. It may be estimated that about three-fifth of the global student population has been affected by the pandemic due to lockdown measures and not opening the educational institutions as a precautionary measure to restrict the spread.

According to the estimates (as of March 23, 2020) by UNESCO, some 135 crore students around the globe couldn't go to class or college. These include students learning at different levels such as pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary, and tertiary levels of education. Across the globe, most of the countries (about 138) have decided to close their educational institutions (WEF, 2020) [3]. According to KPMG India study findings, educations and in particular learning activities are affected due to the pandemic. Students and teachers are engaging themselves in the online way and continuing their learning efforts. While different sectors of the economy are currently going through a 'restart' mode there is the commencement of learning activities in the educational institutions as they return to 'new normal'. It is likely, they may never return completely (KPMG, 2020) [4].

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to provide an overview of the newer ways that may help continue the process of learning and teaching amidst this lockdown situation that is prevailing across the world. Further, it talks about how to continue imparting education to all.

Methodology

This paper makes use of secondary data collected by the authors. The news articles which are related to Indian academics and education, related developments, or changes in the context of the situation due to the pandemic in India have been reviewed for this research paper.

2. Literature Review

Education System in India: In search of many options (including blended learning) to provide education (Farooqui, 2020) [5].

The Indian education system is large and fragmented. There are about 1000 universities and approximately 40,000 colleges in India. This indicates the increased spread of education-related infrastructure in the country. This may be fragmented in nature as there are fewer higher education institutions (HEIs) (AISHE) [6].

India's schooling system is the second largest in the world with 25 crore students (in 15.5 lakh schools). Nearly 50% (about 12 crore) of students in India are enrolled in private schools (4.6 lakh schools). Another 13.1 crore students in India are enrolled in government schools (10.9 lakh schools). It is observed that actual learning outcomes require attention, not only in government schools but also in the case of private schools (Gohain, 2020) [7].

The pandemic has put a limitation on group study or classroom-based learning in India as well as across the world. This situation has forced authorities to explore other ways to impart education.

In India, while this change has not been smooth due to disparities in education provided by private colleges, the government-owned (public) colleges. There has likewise been the difference of opinions on 'how to conduct classes and the prospect of the theory test and qualitative assessment - whether they could be done, and carried out offline or in a web-enabled setting.

Learning in a web-based environment can be done in two ways. The first is the use of a recording of lectures and related proceedings. This is referred to as Massive Open Online Course (MOOCs) when they are made accessible to people. The second one is the use of web-enabled classrooms (giving lectures in the form of the webinar) by using any software and or application. This needs good quality support in terms of IT devices and internet bandwidth and availability of the same. Also, it may be noted that trained people with interest and familiarity with technology are required in this situation.

3. Use of technology acting as an enabler to address the issues and the situation

There are different views on this aspect of whether technology is an enabler in imparting education to all. These are expressed by teachers and students of different institutions.

Timothy Gonsalves, Director of IIT Mandi, has opinions "The concern related to online study is about the involvement and engagement of student as well as support of the infrastructure. In rural India, this support may or may not be available, and hence it is likely that the students from remote villages may get slow and interrupted internet access." (Farooqui, 2020) [5]

With the beginning of the pandemic spread in India, the education sector gradually came to standstill with all the institutions closed and their activities such as classes and teaching are suspended. Many management and law institutions have considered MOOCs as an option for imparting learning. National Law University (NLU) of Delhi is one of such institutions deploying such learning mechanisms. As the pandemic started in March 2020, the institution made some courses available to the public. This has allowed students

to learn using both legal study materials and digital resources. The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Human Resources and Development have both authorized these course materials (MHRD).

G. S. Bajpai, Professor, and Registrar of NLU, Delhi, talks about the increased involvement of technology-based tools in imparting education. "This is a new medium. This caters to their demands and helps in their personal growth. This is benefiting students who are not enrolled at reputed institutions in the country. In the field of science and technology, engineering this option is used but is not yet considered by the institutions providing law-related education. NLU, Delhi is first to explore such things." he says (Farooqui, 2020) [5]

Many people believe that online training isn't as straightforward as talking into a microphone on one side, connecting to a computer or phone on the other, and tuning in. There exist different kinds of unforeseen problems with this kind of web-based enabled learning mechanisms at both the ends – the learner (student) and the educator (the teacher).

Online Education for Teachers

- Advantages
 - Beneficial in the context of providing education in 'distance mode'.
 - Enable use of creative ways for educating with the assistance of innovation and online devices.
 - Irrespective of the location, able to reach the mass student population.
- Disadvantages
 - It is not possible to interact with all the students due to constraints on technology-based infrastructure.
 - There is no consent over assessment or evaluation of the students who have participated by way of the 'online' method.
 - Online training requires some serious willingness, effort, and time.
 - Absence of one-to-one interaction, personal learning relationship with the students and does not permit interactive dialogue and discussions.

Online Education for Students

- Advantages
 - Able to learn at their own pace by giving attention to the recorded and live discussions.
 - Continued learning process even during the pandemic.
 - The capacity to grasp the learning by utilizing diverse online apparatuses and strategies.
- Disadvantages
 - Studying while living at home may have different interruptions.
 - Limitations are caused by the technology and devices that are responsible for their functioning as well as internet access.
 - Lack of classroom-type environment and experience that has debated, and discussions.
 - Getting used to learning and being evaluated online.

It may be noted that technology is enabling factor and at the same time becomes a limiting factor, especially in India, where getting connectivity or having basic access to the internet is a challenge.

4. Empirical Data

The authors would like to present empirical data related to the education sector in India and suggest taking suitable measures in imparting education to all.

Rural-Urban Gap in Secondary Education (NSO, 2020) [8]

A recent investigation by National Statistical Office (NSO) says that there is a disparity between rural and urban areas when it comes to learning. This indicates the presence of the digital divide. The survey mentioned that in rural areas, just one out of twenty-five households have access to computers as compared to one in four households in the urban areas.

Parameter	Significant difference in Secondary Education	
	Rural Households	Urban Households
Access to Computers	4%	23%
Access to Secondary Schools	38%	70%
Annual average expenditure / student (In Rs.) at Secondary Level	5,856	17,518
Annual average expenditure / student (In Rs.) at Senior Secondary Level	9,148	23,832
Literacy rate among those aged 7 and above	73.5%	87.7%

Source: (NSO, 2020) [8]

Home Education has limited reach (MSCERT, 2020) [9]

The education department has a home learning programme. Various media covered under this programme are:

- Doordarshan Sahyadri – Gali Gali Sim Sim.
- Bookyboo.
- Pratham’s Missed Call Do, Kahaani Suno.
- Using the DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) app from WhatsApp forwards by teachers.

But the lack of access to tools and technology may set back the learning.

A study conducted by MSCERT and UNICEF to understand how it is accessed by students from standards I to VIII shows the disparity, and ways to upscale so that children have smooth access to online lessons. Some of the outcomes of the said study are listed below:

- Home Learning Package Access Mode
 - Overall, 50% of students access the package.
 - 34% via digital learning material.
 - 34% through TV.
 - 26% via online classes.

- 10% via radio.
- Barriers to learning
 - Learning material not appropriate to the learning level.
 - The learning material was not interesting.
 - No support from teachers.
 - No smartphone.
 - Poor network connectivity.
 - The internet is not available.
 - No money to recharge phones.
 - Engaged in household chores.
 - Learning material was not available in their medium of instruction (Urdu, Kannada, Gujarati, etc.).

5. Suggestion

So, what can be done to ensure continuity of learning?

The authors think that a multiple-way based thinking and approach is required to manage the situation. It is required to establish a sturdy and fruitful Indian education system in the long term.

In a country like India with a huge population, it is observed that there are disparities in infrastructure (such as availability of power, internet connectivity, and computers, etc.) in urban and rural areas. Therefore, in this context, 'online education' cannot be the only solution to impart education. The 'One size fits all' approach is not going to work here as one needs to think and consider suitable alternatives in the form of the 'blended learning' approach as applicable depending on the location and end-user and their needs.

Here the Authors would like to emphasize the need of strengthening the basic education framework that imparts education to all. It may be noted that traditional learning method such as classroom teaching has significant involvement and engagement of the students. Further, this results in a significant transfer of knowledge (or learning) from teacher to student. The 'online learning' mechanism will not be able to do this. Hence it is suggested to use a combination of the traditional (involvement-based) and modern (interactive) methods in the form of the 'blended learning' method.

With this background, the authors would like to highlight some suggestions provided by the MSCERT-UNICEF study the same are presented herewith. It may be noted that these suggestions are not universal or generalized. They are provided for information purposes only. The actual implementation of these will depend on the nature of the end-user, their geography/location, and their learning needs.

These suggestions are provided as measures to plan home learning and ensure that learning remains uninterrupted during the COVID-19 outbreak (MSCERT, 2020) [9].

These recommendations are as follows:

- Consider the opening of schools in areas with no learning facilities after assessing safety.
- Facilitate the teachers by providing them orientation in 'home learning'.

- Educate the parent community by providing them information about ‘home learning’.
- Formulate the guidelines regarding ‘home learning’ activity and keep track of the learning procedure by the learners.
- Make the ‘home learning’ a time-bound activity according to the characteristics of the learner.
- Increase the content availability. Include more learning materials on TV, through phone calls / SMS.
- Consider the use of community radio in providing learning.
- With low usage of DIKSHA and online media, create a stronger delivery chain with messages on the use of DIKSHA, online media.

6. Conclusion

For the limited working of adolescent personalities in this time of emergency, a balanced and successful instructive practise is essential. It will develop skills that will boost their employment, profitability, well-being, and prosperity in the coming decades, as well as India's overall progress. At these conditions, maintaining continuity of instruction in government schools and universities is critical.

This disruption of education has prompted policymakers to reassess present delivery and pedagogical approaches in schools and higher education by blending classroom learning with e-learning modalities to create a standard learning framework.

It may be concluded that there is a need to strengthen existing (basic) education infrastructure in India. A blended learning approach – an integration of the traditional systems with modern methods using technology, can be explored.

The authors believe that concentrated efforts by the entire stakeholders (of the education sector) viz. the Government, and Education sector to understand the need of each other and accordingly provide continued learning that will benefit each other, the society, and the nation.

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