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The emergent transition to remote learning online: A study of the experience of students' doing postgraduation in education

Abstract

TThis paper attempts to examine and situate the experience of students enrolled in two postgraduate programmes in the discipline of education during the pandemic. The lockdown introduced in response to COVID-19 pandemic entailed a sudden and abrupt shift to the online mode of teaching. In order to understand the efficacy of the online classroom space for students preparing or studying to be teachers and teacher educators, it is important to reflect on the nature of the discipline of education and the current context in which the transition to online learning happened. This transition was not an outcome of a systematically planned academic experiment or endeavour. This paper builds upon narratives emerging from the responses of students pursuing postgraduate degrees in education, and early childhood care and education. The responses to an open-ended questionnaire, semester-end student feedback forms on courses taught in an online mode, periodic informal interactive sessions with students over a period of seven months, and participant observations conducted by the authors in a School of Education Studies in a university in New Delhi were gathered. The informal interactions and group discussions with students were facilitated by the authors' location as faculty in the same department. The intersubjective space thus created between the participants and the researchers, allowed a closer engagement with everyday challenges and students' reflections and experiences. The paper draws from the interpretive paradigm and attempts to examine how students experienced the digital pedagogic space and this transition to online learning.

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the world in an unprecedented manner, affecting and influencing virtually all of activities and structures. In India, the nation witnessed a complete lockdown beginning in the third week of March that continued for months till almost July 2020. The pandemic also resulted in the closure of schools and higher education institutions (HEI) from March 2020 across the globe. This was followed by a sudden shift to online education. Apart from being mid-course, the "suddenness" of the shift also entailed an unpreparedness on the part of educational institutions, faculty and students—in terms of both infrastructure as well as necessary skill sets. In the context of programmes that facilitate students to become early childhood teachers, educators and teacher educators, the very nature of the discipline and objectives of the programmes posed additional challenges. The complex dynamics that emerged call for a critical examination of both, the facilitative dimensions that provide insights into online pedagogy for future educators, as well as limitations that circumscribe the online mode of learning. In this context, this paper builds upon narratives emerging from the responses of students pursuing post graduate degrees in Education, and Early Childhood Care and Education.

The two postgraduate academic programmes on "Education" and "Early Childhood Care and Education" (ECCE) aim to bring together elements of liberal and professional preparation of educators

and endeavour to make possible a study of education both as a social phenomenon and an area of knowledge, while developing the skills needed for professional practice. The programmes have intense field-based components at both school and non-school educational and early childhood care sites. These field immersion opportunities aim at providing a space to the graduates to engage with critical debates in education as they examine the field realities and understand the contexts of education. Many graduates eventually work as teachers, teacher educators, curric ulum developers, researchers, consultants and professionals in government and non-government organisations. Further there are core and elective courses like Research Methods, Self-Development, Experience of Education, Inclusion of Young Children with Disability, Understanding Children and Childhoods, Educational and Organizational Leadership, Instructions in Middle and Secondary School Mathematics and Geometry, and others, whose pedagogic imagination involves workshop components, field visits, group activities and regular discussions on various concepts by drawing on experiences to make connections, reflect and review. The online transition thus had implications for the nature of exposure to the field sites and the classroom engagements.

e-Learning during COVID-19

We are living through what Castells (1996) refers to as the "information age", marked by a movement of information through networks that he expected to overtake the circulation of goods as the primary source of value in society. Beetham and Sharpe (2007, p. 4) argue that some of the social and cultural reorganisation that Castells predicted can already be traced in the ways that the contexts of education are changing:

"Epistemologically, for example, what counts as useful knowledge is increasingly biased towards what can be represented in digital form. Many scientific and research enterprises now depend on data being shared in the almost instantaneous fashion enabled by the Internet... less thought has been given to the knowledge that is forgotten or lost in the process of digitization: practical skills, know-how that is deeply embedded in the context of use, and other tacit knowledge associated with habits of practice"

This kind of tacit knowledge that is drawn on by effective teachers, and by effective learners is what many perceive to be rendered difficult to actualise as the world transitioned to an emergency remote form of learning. Overall, acceptance of digitally enhanced learning and teaching in higher education has grown over recent years, particularly in the Western European context. However, even in such contexts many institutions are still in the process of developing a more systematic and strategic way of digital integration. An International Association of Universities (IAU 2020) report indicates that despite having online repositories for educational materials, and institutional infrastructure for digitally enhanced learning and teaching in place, as well as digital skills training for staff and students, universities, even in the European context found the transition to online education during the pandemic challenging (IAU 2020, p. 10).

A point has often been frequently made that what has been provided in the context of the pandemic is not simply distance learning, but emergency remote provision. But this crisis is also posited by some as "a historic opportunity to make a major leap in terms of digital take-up, as well as a general transformation of learning and teaching. This euphoria needs to be reviewed with caution as experiences from across the globe attest to how this disruption led to adversely affecting student experience of learning remotely (Peters and Rizvi et. al., 2020).

In the Indian context, some of the key factors impacting this transition include the availability of technical infrastructure, accessibility of the institute, capacity building of teachers, and distance learning competencies, including the availability of devices and network with students

(Mittal, 2020, IAU Report). Mittal (2020) points towards how the government and institutions will need to invest heavily in technical infrastructure to enable the shift from conventional to a blended education model post-COVID. Learning assessment and examination approaches will also need to be reviewed in order to comply with online teaching and learning pedagogy. High quality Open Source Educational learning resources in various Indian languages will need to be developed, especially in subjects requiring practical skills and the development and training of staff and faculty for online teaching and learning pedagogy through extensive capacity-building programs. Given the scale of the higher education system in India, the projected tasks themselves require almost a transformative project of re-hauling the system and configuring new ways of quality assurance.

Several survey-based researches during this time brought out the stark inequity in access to online modes (NIEPA 2020, as cited in Sharma, 2020). A NIEPA report on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in India, published in July 2020, suggests that online lessons are inaccessible to nearly 90 lakh students, nearly 65 per cent, enrolled in government colleges in India. The prime reason, according to the report, is unavailability of electricity, smartphones, laptops and internet. The findings are based on a ground survey conducted across 419 government and private institutes, from where 543 responses were received. The Report suggests that the inability to access online lessons will shrink overall enrollment in higher education institutes in India by 60 lakh students, from 3.7 crores to 3.1 crores.

Apart from the infrastructural dimension of the process of change, the experience across the globe has highlighted the need for centering the student voice and experiences in order to draw some essential lessons and build institutional resilience in the face of future crises. Peters, Rizvi, et al. (2020, p.2) posit critical questions for educators: "how might we rethink the basic purposes of education, and the pedagogic models better suited to the ever-present possibilities of insecurity, risk and relentless change?" They argue:

"Digital pedagogies are … not neutral with respect to the kind of sociality they encourage. Since a core function of education has always been social and cultural formation, the question arises as to what kind of sociality is possible when students and their faculty only meet in the digital space…Also important…are the issues of inequalities of access and outcomes in the new pedagogic spaces, and how they might be mitigated"(p. 2).

An engagement with the changed dimensions induced within an emergency context of the pandemic can perhaps enable an exploration and identification of challenges and opportunities for the discipline of education in particular and the higher education sector in general in a post pandemic world. Even as researchers engage with questions on how useful online learning is and has been, it is important to remind ourselves of the complex context in which this online learning is being experienced by both students as well as the teachers. We argue that the experience of a space or a process is shaped by the meaning one makes of it, a meaning which is not simply dictated by the explicitly stated mission statements but emerges out of an interactive and mediated process. The paper explores this dimension from the perspective of students of education.

Methodology

This paper is situated within the interpretive paradigm and seeks to explore how students enrolled in postgraduate programmes in the disciplines of Education and Early Childhood Care and Education, experienced and made sense of the online learning space during the pandemic. The sample of the study consisted of postgraduate students, pursuing MA Education and MA Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) at a

university in Delhi, who had shifted to online mode of teaching-learning in the beginning of April 2020. The data was collected in the form of (i) course feedback forms from students of four batches (particularly on online engagement) for eight taught courses; (ii) responses to an open-ended questionnaire administered to the same set of students for an in-depth exploration of their online learning experiences (15 responses were obtained); (iii) periodic group discussions and informal interactions conducted with each cohort of students over a period of nine months. A few of these interactions occurred during the online transactions of the courses taught by the researchers, when confronted with challenges like low or irregular attendance, limited participation on the part of students during class discussions. Some conversations took place during informal discussions around several academic and other concerns raised by students themselves. Since the researchers were also participant observers in the study, the insights emerging from the intersubjective spaces that were created during formal and informal teacher-student interactions, and researchers' reflexivity also contributed to the triangulation of the data.

Data analysis and discussion

In mid-March 2020, the government of the National Capital Region of Delhi, India decided to close the schools, colleges and universities for a period of two weeks in the light of increasing incidences of COVID-19 in the region. While initially it was planned as a two-week break, it became very long as the Government of India announced a nationwide lockdown during this period. This necessitated a sudden shift to the online mode given the uncertainty around the schedule of lifting of lockdown and opening of campus spaces. It was in early April 2020 that the university formally decided to shift teaching to the online space and the academic calendars were revised to accommodate this shift. Till this time, the teaching in our department had been majorly in face-to-face mode with only a few of us using learning management system (LMS) platforms like Google Classrooms and Moodle. The use of these platforms was limited to sharing of reading and other pedagogic materials with students, some discussion chains and for submission of assignments. The shift required all faculty irrespective of their familiarity, knowledge or competence in online pedagogy to begin reaching out to students for course completion through synchronous and asynchronous modes. Faculty members were expected to conduct synchronous online lectures using Google Meet or Zoom, and make available recorded lectures/PowerPoints with audio on platforms like Google Classrooms and Moodle. In some cases, the faculty also provided study material and a weblink to the recordings through WhatsApp groups. When this shift happened, there was little preparation or a clearly articulated plan of action. The IT cell along with the faculty members conceived over time the possibilities and limitations of various online meeting platforms during this process. Few orientation sessions conducted by the University brought to the fore the myriad challenges that teachers were facing during this transition. An unpreparedness, lack of expertise and 'learning while doing' on the part of teachers contributed to the context in which students across disciplines were to initially experience online learning. The lockdown continued for a couple of months and even though interstate borders and other essential services opened for the public, educational campuses continued to remain closed.

During the first phase of the lockdown, nearly one-third of the courses/semester was left for completion, which could only be finished by end of May. Graduating students completed their dissertations virtually, changing their research questions to adapt to data availability. Many students who were expected to do school-based observations had to resort to desk study and telephonic interviews. The beginning of the new semester in August 2020 was accompanied by a more

cogently articulated academic plan by the University. The realisation had hit home that the second wave may be followed by a third one and it was clear that schools and universities would continue to work in an online mode only. What seemed like a temporary arrangement and an emergent response during the first phase of the lockdown was now a more stable context in which both faculty members and students had to make sense of the teaching-learning experience. Some students wondered if it would be worthwhile to continue teaching-learning in an online mode when the explicit objectives and expectations with which they had joined the education programme would remain unfulfilled or partially fulfilled. The much sought-after NGO-based field immersion, which required students to travel outside Delhi and engage with the organisational context of the field was transformed into a task-based learning through assignment completion for the field site. Collaborative and group-learning, dynamics of organisational life, unpredictability of an unfamiliar environment—elements that added to the comprehensive exposure and learning for students from the practicum became acutely restricted experientially.

While new admissions were delayed, the first year students' progression to the second year was marked by a disappointment towards an unprecedented change in academic plan, and also some motivation to make most of the opportunities available through the online mode. For most students joining this programme, the important incentives were the emphasis on research and field engagement, a dialogic and collaborative approach to theory courses and the location of the programme in a social science university which regularly organises lectures, seminars, workshops and other forms of academic and co-curricular experiences. There were some who had left teaching or foregone teaching jobs after the completion of their B.Ed. or B.El. Ed degrees to join this course in a face-to-face mode for the promise of an intense academic experience. The 'non-voluntary' nature of the transition to the online mode formed an important part of the context. This was quite unlike the experience that teachers and teachers educators have when they willingly participate in a self-chosen online programme for faculty professional development.

The experience of students was complex, diverse and evolving as regular online interactions outside the classroom/course context continued to provide critical feedback to the faculty members and informed their efforts. The experience of the classroom and students' engagement as it unfolded across the semester is discussed in greater detail below.

Challenges of online learning during the pandemic

Some of the key themes that emerged were around the challenges associated with the online learning amidst the pandemic. These challenges were of a diverse and often interconnected nature and were informed by the socio-economic contexts of the family, the effect of the pandemic on people's physical and psychosocial well-being and their means of livelihood, the very nature of the 'online' learning environment and the aspirations and expectations of the students from the programme.

Unequal access and inequitable availability of resources

One of the most pronounced challenges was the unequal access to the online space, especially for the already disadvantaged and marginalised. The current moment entailed a transition to remote learning in a context that the academic community had not chosen for itself. The educational institutions were expected to shift to teaching-learning online with a muted assumption that the infrastructure required for the transition was available with the institutions and students. A smooth online transition required that all students had exclusive access to a laptop, a desktop computer or a smartphone at home, there was internet connectivity of a

good bandwidth and an internet pack with adequate data.

While writing about her experience of online learning, one of the students termed it as "*divisive and discriminatory*". Many students felt that a "*forced*" shift to online, privileged those with resources. Several students shared that either their families or they themselves had to borrow money to be able to buy a laptop for the online classes and this laptop had to be shared with siblings who were also attending classes. Hence, attending online classes continued to remain a challenge.

Many students from outside Delhi began returning to their homes once the interstate travel reopened as several universities had closed their hostels and paying for 'paying guest accommodations' for 'online classes' appeared an unnecessary expense. The return of students to their homes which were not only in urban, well-connected areas meant difficulty in access caused by poor internet connectivity. The issues in connecting synchronously to the online classes emerged as a key concern that also caused stress and anxiety in many. A student reported the experience of online learning as follows:

"*Stressful, panic [inducing] due to bad connectivity resulting in late arrival of notifications of assignments and classes, the same reason [also] hampering in [meeting] assignment deadlines*"

Another student shared the following experience:

"*There's connectivity issues and I have missed out several classes, plus [am] unable to access class recording.*"

"…lots of internet issues and limited data. When we were asked to watch any video, I have to wait for weekends as we don't have classes then and I can use my data to watch the videos."

A focused engagement with online learning also required the students to have a dedicated space at home where they could attend the classes without any distractions. Not all students had the privilege of having such a space and it posed challenges to their engagement. One of the students shared,

"I couldn't speak a lot in class even when the teachers invited, as it would require me to unmute and there was noise at the back due to other members at home working."

In several discussions with students, the absence of a dedicated space emerged as an important concern. A physical classroom allowed them the space where they came together as a collective in pursuit of a common goal. Even the spaces outside of classrooms—library, canteen, corridors, and courtyards added to a unique experience of the collegial life. However, home was a very different space where family members were occupied in different tasks which sometimes could be kept apart but on other occasions, they also came into conflict with one another.

The challenges due to inequitable availability of resources became more heightened amidst the pandemic, where the impact of the economic and health crisis was felt by most to some extent and definitely more on the already vulnerable. Several students had witnessed the loss of a family member's job thereby necessitating that they also contribute to the family income by taking up tuitions or part time jobs. The need to purchase laptops, desktops or smartphones pushed many students to have to borrow or take up work. Several students also wrote to faculty inquiring if they could take a zero semester to be able to work. These negotiations became more difficult in absence of face-to-face interactions between the faculty members and the students.

Difficulties in learning engagement

Besides the challenges of unequal access, the nature of the online platform particularly in the discipline of education created different challenges in engagement. Several students shared that due to difficulties in participation in the online mode, learning became more didactic and hence less engaging. While many of these difficulties in participation were caused by insufficient

resources as discussed above, the nature of the online platform also contributed to it. In several discussions and feedback forms, students had shared that with home being a shared space, they often found it "difficult" or sometimes also "embarrassing" to unmute. When asked why they did not use the chat when not able to unmute, a student shared,

"*When a professor urges everyone to unmute their mics and speak up by calling out students' names, I am always worried about my background noise. And when I am typing out an answer in the chat box, someone who is able to unmute their mic speaks up and answers by the time I type out my entire sentence.*"

Another student also shared that their thoughts got shaped as they talked, however the process of writing was different.

"When I am unable to unmute, I try to write, but it is a slower process as I am still thinking. By the time I finish typing, the moment I wanted to intervene is gone, the class has moved on."

The excerpt above provides important insights into the relation between the processes of thinking, speaking and writing, and the role of peers or the teacher as "more able" mediators. In class discussions, often students develop their thoughts as they are speaking. The gaps or struggles in articulation are supported by the peer group or the teacher who may prompt or subtly guide to help the student reach the articulation. When one is physically distant from the teacher and the peer group, writing a thought as it develops, becomes a lonely exercise where a thought can be shared only when fully developed and written. There is little possibility of it being facilitated and by the time one completes the process of articulation, the class may have moved forward and hence the spontaneity of participation is also compromised. The discussion in the online mode where students cannot see each other and often respond by way of writing, there are also challenges in learning being an intersubjective, critical dialogic practice (Matusov, 2009) where the collective understanding is not a sum total of the individual inputs, but rather is arrived at by reflecting on and building on each other's interventions. In the context of a programme that has students aiming to become teachers or teacher educators, to learn about mediated learning and collaborative learning in the absence of experience of such pedagogy, there is always a likelihood of concepts remaining only abstract.

The theme also provides useful insights into the classroom as a space for a collective which is working towards shared goals through a collaborative, mutually facilitative process. Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptualisation of "community of practice" becomes relevant here as the imagination of a classroom goes beyond that of a didactic space to involve a sense of participation in a shared endeavour. It is through the process of social participation that the process and goals of learning assume meaning. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community… the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice" (p. 29). The online learning, as shared by the responses of the students, took away from them the '*sense of a collective*' or of a '*shared experience*'.

Students further shared that the shift from seeing teachers and peers in the classroom to having to stare at computer screens, which were many a times blank as the video cameras had to be turned off to facilitate easy access for the ones having slow networks, impacted their interest in the class. The awkwardness of silences can occasionally be a useful pedagogic choice made by a teacher in a real time classroom to push students to think and break the silence through a question or a reflection. These silences assumed different meaning in the online context where students had options to drop out or shift their attention to something else. Students who had to attend

the classes through smartphones shared how they struggled with reading the text of the Powerpoint presentations and readings presented on screen share. This disrupted their engagement with both the shared text as well as the concept.

The porous nature of boundaries between home and work created at the time of the pandemic impacted engagement in more ways than distraction through noise. In a programme where nearly ninety per cent of the students pursuing the degree to become a teacher or a teacher educator are women, these porous boundaries were significant in shaping the learning space at home. These were adult women, many of whom had already worked at a full-time job, a few were married and most had an increased share of responsibilities at home. A student during one of the several informal conversations that were organised during the peak of the pandemic shared,

"*At home, I am supposed to help, when I go to university then at that time nobody disturbs. I focus on class. Now that the classes are happening at home, I am expected to help even while attending classes.*"

Another student shared that she was expected to cook and finish other responsibilities at home before she could sit in front of the laptop. The household chores had to be prioritised over the class work. She struggled with attending classes and submitting assignments in the absence of active support from teachers and peers which was more readily available when she came to the campus.

There were students whose parents were working in the health sector and other essential services and hence their responsibilities had increased at home in light of the nature of their parents' work. A student whose mother was a health sector worker shared how she had to spend a lot more time in ensuring cleaning and sanitisation of home and taking care of household responsibilities as her mother's working hours had also increased.

Another important challenge to students' engagement with learning was posed by the nature of several courses whose pedagogic imagination required more participation of students in the form of class discussions, preparing group projects, visits to school and non school educational sites and participation in activities and workshops. These courses in the programme align with the aim of the programme to encourage students to engage with the field (school and non school sites), the educational practices there and situate them in the larger historical, sociopolitical and cultural context. While filling the feedback form for the course titled: 'Experience of Education: Immersed Reflections', which aims to place experience at the centre of educational discourse through the discipline of educational psychology, a student shared the following:

"*it took away the 'experience' from the course titled 'experience of education'. the course was completed successfully but compared to offline medium, it left much to be desired in terms of discussion, reflection, etc.*"

The "missing out on experience" was a concern that emerged in the feedback across courses. Similar feedback was received for a course on research methods where students felt that the online classes were not as effective in providing a hands-on experience. In the offline mode, topics like development of research tools, collection and transcription of data, thematic analysis, etc., were usually covered in a workshop mode. There was active guidance from the faculty, who could walk around the class as students worked on the assigned tasks and discuss with them in case of any challenges.

"it is very challenging to conduct a course as practical as research methods totally in an online mode. So, obviously there were some challenges at the students' end"

"*It was challenging to engage with a research course in an online modality.*"

The shift of summer field attachment to online mode evoked strong and emotional responses from students who were looking

forward to engaging with the field and communities. The component of the field also connects with other theoretical courses like State Society and Education, Educational and Organisational Leadership and others, as it helps make the connection between concepts and practice. Shifting the field attachment to an online mode marked a shift from immersion and engagement with the context of the field to having to independently complete assigned tasks. A prolonged engagement with online mode in a context where social and physical contacts had become extremely restricted, also led to a fatigue in the later months.

Negotiations: How students coped and what helped in meeting the challenges

The challenges that students encountered were not merely brought to attention through the questionnaire or course feedback forms. The university-wide decision of faculty members to volunteer for creating support forums for students had a critical role to play in understanding students' experience and needs. The authors of this paper were part of one such team of volunteer teachers involved in holding conversations with students and reaching out to them through emails and telephonic communication. The silence in the classroom found a narrative around them as we explored and talked of random issues and day-to-day lived experiences in informal spaces. We found that students liked hanging around in these virtual meetings. Many students stayed quiet even here, responding sometimes only through 'chat' mode. But, one of the authors found that many students would approach and call her after the session concluded, opening up about their challenges at the domestic or academic front and share how they gathered the courage to call and reach out for support after the collective sharing sessions.

The process of continuous conversations and multi-layered feedback seems to have worked in enabling teachers to understand what was desirable and what was not; in which domain was improvisation needed, and where explicit form of student support was required. Sometimes, opening up and sharing candidly our own reflections of the online teaching experience enabled students to share their experiences more vividly. Some of the key insights into how they negotiated the multiple challenges eventually provided the faculty with ways of adapting and improvising the online learning experience. Students shared that they found the online exchange more meaningful when sharing of ideas, views were encouraged through discussions during class time. Academic concepts that were discussed and not simply lectured on seemed to have been received more effectively. A more organised learning space was created where students were provided timely access to learning resources in a staggered and well-planned manner before the lectures helped in facilitating discussion-based learning. Having a visual scaffold during the lecture, in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, or concept-maps/ diagrams, or online activities that involved active participation of students seemed to help them retain better attention during synchronous classes.

"*...most meaningful interactions online have been when both the student and teacher forget they are sitting in front of a machine and realise that both are being listened to. But it also depends on the environment; developing interaction through machines is difficult.*

When I stopped comparing it to the physical class experiences and just accepting this transition, I could find something meaningful."

Students coped with their online learning difficulties in varied ways. One student shared their experience as follows:

"*...trying to re-frame [my] thoughts and focusing more on what my brain is able to process, setting short goals and becoming comfortable with not doing well academically (not in terms of grades alone, but actual learning), trying to stay consistent with short goals set in my dissertation class—because there is a mentor that I get to talk to every week, and the tasks are broken down into small doable steps*

I listen to lectures more than one time to get my concepts clear. This thing wasn't possible in an offline mode.

Talking to my friends about the struggles of this online mode of learning helped me cope with it better as it made me realize that I was not the only one facing issues with it and that I had company."

A new sense of solidarity seemed to emerge in the context of collective struggle and effort to cope with the challenges embedded within the online context of learning during the pandemic. Students were able to empathise, as expressed in the responses to the questionnaire, with their peers and faculty members, collectively adapting and humanising the alienating Google Meet screen:

Some conversations where we talk openly about how we are all managing with the pandemic, helps me hear from my teachers and peers once in a while. Then staying in touch with one or two friends, by talking about the assignments and trying to help each other cope with deadlines etc., has been helpful. In general, a new group that came out of this period was the community of students who were protesting during this lockdown. I found immense comfort in talking to them about issues of social justice and trying to do what was in our reach with regards to the inaccessibility issues with online learning for marginalised students. But more than that, talking to another cohort and realising I am not alone in feeling lost and overwhelmed this semester, made me feel better.

I feel very disconnected and aloof...I have to continue my studies and do assignments and also have to do house chores since I am at home and with all this, I have to forget that I have something that we call 'peers'. I said I have to forget because if I try to connect to them, then their challenges just make me feel bad for them and helpless that I cannot help them...and that I am privileged that my family could afford borrowing money from someone when there are many students who can't even borrow that much amount of money and thinking of dropping out of college..."

The narratives shared above point towards a considered response of these students to the challenges faced by their peers and an astute self-awareness about the emotional work involved in listening and sharing of struggles—the struggle to come to terms with a very real "helplessness" in the face of challenges that cannot simply be heard out, and if not addressed, weighed heavily on students' minds. Enabling a support system where this helplessness did not turn into despair required a sustained effort on the part of the faculty collective as well as the extended peer group.

"*This time is difficult for all of us, and one needs to be mindful of it. I made sure to talk to my peers whenever I couldn't cope with lots of tasks and we also understood that it is difficult for our faculty too, so we try to finish our tasks as soon as we can. And for content thanks to technology and faculty we have all our content in Google classroom...*"

What did students find useful in the online learning experience?

When students were asked about what they looked forward to the most and found useful in the online engagement, an interesting set of responses emerged. The dominant voice and the first response had usually been about the disenchantment with the blank screen and difficulty in concentrating. The second set of responses on the questionnaire as well as what emerged during our cohort-wise discussion with students was how online learning platforms had emerged as a critical space for social support that continued to nurture students as a collective and added to their sense of belonging:

"*I look forward to interacting with my classmates and faculty... Looking at someone's face apart from my family members' and listening to other people's voices...these (online classes) were also the only platform where we came together to learn.*"

As teachers, we found on several occasions that if we logged in to our class a few minutes early, students would be present and a discussion would already be going

on. On probing this aspect with students, we found that it was one way for students to simulate the real classroom experience where they would chat incessantly between two sessions and they reproduced it in the virtual context by joining the class 10–15 minutes prior to the teacher and using the non-teaching/non-teacher present time for social interaction with their classmates.

The experience of a lockdown itself had been unprecedented in terms of exacerbating fragile family dynamics—creating a new and intensive emotional context in which the crisis and fear of the pandemic was compounded by the complex domestic equations and family dynamics. Students, primarily women, experienced the gendered demands on their time at home, acutely highlighting how the campus provided a more congenial and supportive space to study without them being encumbered by domestic demands on their time. Within the new arrangement, class time, and availability of a predefined online learning schedule enabled students to seek normalcy and negotiate an academic routine in some form (however contrived):

"*They [online classes] add some semblance of normalcy to the day—following a timetable, doing something according to a timetable and calendar.*

The learning space which a classroom offered in the university cannot be compared to this [online] medium...but, online learning has helped me to stay connected with academic work rather than completely shunning it [given the demands on my time at home]. There's no doubt that in these times, it is due to the online learning medium only that we are connected."

Being able to connect to people and ideas outside the immediate environment, sounding out anxieties during informal discussions, and having a sense of productive engagement with work also seemed to have enabled students to cope with uncertain and chaotic external environments. Pedagogically, an interesting insight emerged about how a set of students felt that they benefited from the transition to online learning with the possibility of going over recorded lectures and resources asynchronously:

"*I get to reflect much more than I used to, giving time to myself to learn and process my understanding and doubts without any distractions. It is hard, but I eventually managed it*".

Another student added,

"*I like the online mode as I am unable to concentrate when everyone is talking and discussing. I feel inhibited and anxious. At home, I can listen to the lecture quietly without pressure to have to speak or always contribute.*"

The dimension of self-paced learning emerged and seemed to have been a new learning experience for students as well as teachers. The experience demonstrated the need for a more useful form of blended learning approach, or a flipped classroom. As a programme engaging with macro and micro context of school education and good practices, we had very little engagement with ICT in school education. The pandemic-induced unplanned transition to online pedagogy provided a default template of experimentation and trial for both teacher educators and future teachers/educators with digital learning integrated course design and online learning platforms. Initial conversations with the student cohort and amidst the faculty had clearly demonstrated a fair skepticism about effectiveness of the online engagement. Most of them saw it as a futile exercise and even argued for a zero semester with no teaching and assessment. Irrespective of the skepticism, the experience as it emerged, ended up providing insights to students about what they found could work and help them learn better given the circumstances.

"*One positive aspect of this has been that if one were to have 5/5 level of structure in offline classes, in the online mode there is at least 2/5 structure which is better than none at all. Having online classes has helped to be able to have some grip on time during the day and has generally been somewhat better for mental health.*"

While a few faculty members had consistently used Google Classroom/ Institutional LMS as a digital repository of learning materials for their courses, the student experience during the online transition highlights how the use of LMS could actually help in providing access to course materials in a more structured manner. Students found that having all the learning resources in one place (Google Classroom) is helpful in organising study materials.

The informal discussions with students also helped us (faculty members) realise that for many, the new form of engagement over the virtual classroom created a space to articulate their thoughts and share their observations in a manner in which they did not feel 'pressured'. These were the students who admissibly felt a lot of pressure to perform in the classroom in making it count as 'active' participation. Some students felt that they were better able to focus on the teacher's voice in the virtual classroom, and not be distracted by movement within the classroom.

Student absence from the online classroom would add to teacher anxiety about them missing out on learning. Follow up with these students, in several cases, showed that students were negotiating the new social context of 'work and learn from home', and in some cases managing the limited resources available at home (more than one family members sharing the one electronic device available) by actively choosing to not attend classes synchronously but referring to the recorded lectures made available on Google Classroom. Their absence during online classes therefore could not be simply constructed as lack of a learning engagement. However, it clearly emerged that online learning was leading to very diverse kinds of learning experiences for the participants which were circumscribed by the asymmetry of access. Missing out on the dynamic learning experience of synchronous classrooms was often not a choice but a compromise. This took away from the collective experience, enabling some to become full participants, while others to remain at the periphery.

For many students, it was also a moment to place themselves in the larger context of the social core-periphery that emerged during the pandemic:

"*In the learning context, the interactions during the field assessment have been really meaningful for me and the discussions on inequality and class-caste divide have intrigued me a lot. I keep thinking about how people from the disadvantaged backgrounds must be coping with the new lifestyle (in the pandemic) and I also feel that many of us have been living in a delusional and [privileged] world…*"

As the response from one student cited above shows, students also used the learning from their courses to reflect on the larger scale of asymmetry and inequality in society and how despite its imperfections, learning had not stopped for them as it had for thousands of children enrolled in government schools in the country during the pandemic. The field engagement which required students to virtually engage with HGS schools in Jammu, Faridabad, Bhopal, Bhimtal, Varanasi and the FSP programme of SOS Village at Anangpur, also provided critical insights to students about how school teachers were negotiating with technology, and the new learning paradigm. Observing Zoom classes in these schools and discussing the lesson plans with school teachers enabled them to reflect on and compare their experiences. Students also offered suggestions on how to improve interaction and real-time engagement during online classes as the repository of their learning experiences evolved.

"*It was not that engaging at first but sooner or later, we all got the hang of it and the faculty played an important role and made us feel comfortable with the online mode.*"

While we as teachers and students may have a "hang of it" now, as the student cited above has expressed, it is also an opportune moment to critically engage with how to weave in the key insights from the

emergency remote learning experience. This endeavour would require critically engaging with the possibilities of blended as well as significant limitations of the exclusively online learning experience, remaining cognisant of the inequitable socio-economic context of education.

Concluding remarks

The online teaching-learning began at a time when there were strict physical distancing norms restricting the possibilities of face-to-face interaction, or visit to libraries and schools. The participants did not voluntarily choose this mode for teaching or learning and it was done at a time when families were struggling with loss of jobs, health challenges in the light of COVID-19, and an unpredictable and distressing context. Academic programmes and courses that were not designed for online transaction and were perhaps not even fit for an online mode of engagement, requiring active student interaction and participation, had to be adapted to remote learning experience. This paper brought forth the experiential context of students' response to the abrupt transition to online teaching and learning. Student narratives point towards the emergent disruptions, discontinuities, and pedagogical dilemmas and open up a complex space that is constantly being negotiated in the pursuit of coping and adapting to the new "normal".

An emergency immersion into the online mode necessitated by the pandemic is now being seen as an opportunity for new kinds of digital education markets. Online remote learning seems to be emerging as a popular choice and panacea for long-standing problems of inequity in access to education. However, as the themes emerging from the experiences and narratives of the students in the paper show, rather than addressing neatly the problems of access, the online modality comes with its own set of equity and access issues. In a university located in the National Capital Region and equipped with adequate IT infrastructure for faculty, it took an enormous amount of the faculty's time and effort in creating a congenial and facilitative space for students' transition to online learning. And it still seemed to have fallen short of enabling a sense of inclusion for all students. The design pushed some to the newly configured peripheries in the digital space. We also need to take into account a critical insight that emerged in the course of this research. As teachers who had engaged with this cohort of students for over two semesters in real classrooms and university spaces, we had a contextual and situated understanding of who our students were. We had developed a collective sense of whose absence we could interpret as unusual and therefore reach out, and whose silence in the classroom had to be read into or followed up on. The relationship with students which had developed over a year provided a facilitative space to engage meaningfully and empathetically with a diverse set of experiential contexts, and emotional responses of students.

As educators, we will need to critically revisit and engage afresh with the idea of "online" and ICT in education, drawing on the repository of experiences accumulated during the pandemic phase. What are we aiming to achieve through online lectures? Will students connect to the old questions / strategies in the new context? Preparation for emotional work and teacher well-being has been concertedly absent from institutional discourse. Limitations and possibilities of the digital classroom will have to be addressed and situated within the context of equity in access. As a community of practitioners, a sustained research and reflection on the nature of blended learning and curriculum design is required.

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