CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ONLINE EDUCATION AMONG THE TEACHERS CREATED BY COVID-19

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Abstract

The biggest crisis of 21st century has happened due to spread of COVID-19 which has brought the world to stand still. The pandemic has disturbed and created hardships for education sector. The Indian education structure which has familiarity with "face to face or physical teaching-learning process" is now transformed into online mode which is "the new normal" in the post corona world. This is to say that the education sector has imbibed this technology oriented isolation carrying out the teaching learning process in a disrupted manner. But this shift in technology oriented pedagogy has created many challenges for teachers who are not left with any other option rather than to adopt and adapt it in order to survive the teaching learning process. No doubt these challenges have also created opportunities for them. In the light of this, the paper highlights various challenges created by Covid-19 for teachers. Further the steps taken to meet such challenges by exploring various opportunities have been addressed. Certain tools and techniques to ensure the "continuity of learning" through online learning mode have also been described. Authentic websites, Journals and E-contents have been referred for the present study. Suggestions regarding handling the challenges created by COVID-19 by exploring various prospects of online system for the teachers have been presented.

Keywords: Challenges for teachers, COVID-19, ICT enabled online mode, Online learning, Opportunities for teachers

Introduction

"Teachers form the very heart of the education process" this clearly states that teachers should have all the capacities to meet the present challenges. The challenges created in the present scenario could only be satiated through remote learning. But the question arose whether the teachers were prepared towards digital learning.

According to TALIS, the younger teachers who were formally trained in using technology could frequently use it. Nevertheless, it was found in the survey that only 60% of teachers received professional development in ICT, while 18% reported a great need for their development in this area. These figures have highlighted the need of teachers to renew their skills on regular basis so that they are able to bring innovation in their practices and rapidly adapt to the changes inherent in the 21st century. The current situation has pushed teachers to adapt transformations very quickly, "especially in countries where they were lacking in pedagogical and technical skills in order to integrate digital tools into learning (Schleicher 2020). This has put forth certain issues and challenges that needs to be acknowledged.

Challenges for Teachers

To control spread of the Pandemic COVID-19 Governments all over the world have closed educational institutions temporarily. Increased number of lockdown situations have consequently led to 72% of the student's population worldwide non attending schools or colleges (UNESCO). Many other additional learners have also been impacted due to localized closures implemented by some other nations. The graph below shows the number of students impacted due to worldwide closures.

"COVID-19's Staggering Impact On Global Education- Number of learners impacted by national school closures worldwide"
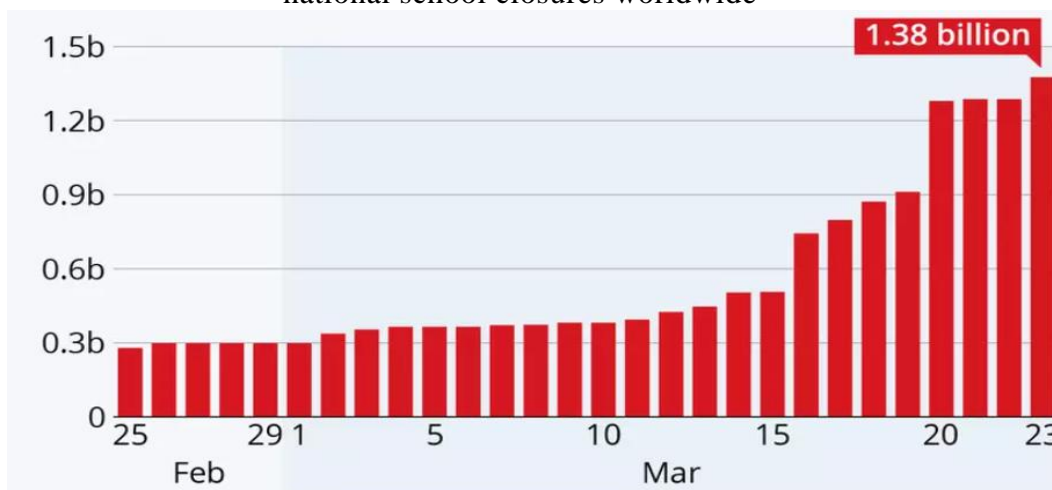

Figure 1. Source: Mc Carthy (Statista 2020)

At this point online or web mode has gained more popularity than the traditional face to face mode of education. On the other hand, the popularity of the online mode has come up with many challenges for all stakeholders and particularly teachers whose onus to carry forward the teaching learning process without any disruption needs an attention. Moving from a physical classroom scenario to confined rooms of boisterous students in their homes are fraught with challenges in imparting same level of learning to them (Fernandes, 2020).

Following difficulties faced by the teachers in the present scenario created by the pandemic have been highlighted below:

- Difficulty in adapting technology: Learning and adapting the whole new process was quite a difficult task as reported by the teachers. Acquiring knowledge about new software and online tools was difficult for the teachers who were not "tech-savvy" (Fernandes, 2020).

- The blurring of professional and private boundaries: Chatterji (2020) reported the teacher's role to be challenging within the Covid-19 scenario. Besides, teaching online, assisting students in finishing their assessments and tests was also a major task. Also the teachers constantly were in touch with the parents through 'virtual parent teacher meetings' and 'WhatsApp groups' regarding the progress of their wards. Constantly catering the needs of students and parents created blurring of professional and private boundaries.

- Computer illiteracy: During the lockdown period for Covid-19, the tutorial institutions are depending totally on the utilization of online platforms which becomes very difficult for the teachers who are not well versed with the knowledge of computers to manage online classes.

- Technical issues: Due to poor technical knowledge of using gadgets some teachers may face difficulty in using online platforms. Poor internet connectivity in the remote areas can also be the cause of hindrance in letting go the online classes smoothly which can pose difficulties for the teachers.

- Poor Adjustment: Most of the teachers are having a troublesome time adjusting to the present new norm. Being in the habit of handling traditional classroom situation has made a tough task for adjustment in the virtual classroom atmosphere which seems challenging and tough to tackle for them. The teachers are unable to keep an eye on each and every student making the classroom environment monotonous isnd making the scholars feel isolated. Disturbance created by some students during online mode is also difficult to deal with.

- Lack of Self-motivation: Motivation of the teachers is very necessary to explore the facilities of using online support services during pandemics which is lacking in some teachers.

Bhardwaj (2020) opined that the 4Cs i.e. "concern for learning, communication with students, consideration or flexibility and consistent follow-up" is important for effectual online teaching. He also added that communication is lifeline during online teaching.

In online learning, communication, the sustenance of teaching often gets disrupted. Innumerable reasons like internet connectivity, misbehaving students, interfering parents etc. make the situations harder.

Parent's intruding the classes and "commenting on the quality of online teaching" has made teaching difficult. Maintaining online class etiquette took time as the students were not in the habit of muting themselves which made the background noise prominent causing disturbance. Harder is to maintain discipline among students as they take this opportunity to commit mischiefs, often excuse themselves from attending classes by blaming poor internet connectivity.

Teachers, whether in government or private setups, had their own set of challenges. Teachers of private schools were more perturbed by online bullying by students and intrusion by parents or relatives whereas government school teachers had a tougher challenge of imparting classes to students belonging to economically weaker sections who didn't own a smartphone or a basic mobile. The report "Save Our Education" by UNESCO claimed that a massive figure of 9.7 million children would drop out permanently with no access to online education. The poorest and most marginalized children would be suffering greatest loss (WION Web Team, 2020).

Researches have also suggested that online education (Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs) did not live up to expectations. Prior attempts made to impart education by radio and television were not effective. So the educators need to make digital education effective because the online classes would now remain and become part of the learning process. For this the teachers are required to be well furnished with good delivery models. Teachers need to go ahead than the youngsters in understanding the digital environment faster. The teacher's community is acquiring the skills faster leaving a few of them who are hesitant to undertake and experiment with the digital platforms. The willingness of acquiring skills by the teachers would determine yielding better results through digital platforms. This new digital platform thus opens up various opportunities for educators who accept the challenges of their profession with alacrity.

Opportunities for Educators

- The prevalent situation has opened the door for "Mobile learning, online learning, and live video-conferencing". This has led to increasing digital literacy rate of educators and learners thereby getting opportunities to attain more knowledge and skills.
- Increased use of electronic media for sharing information through e-mail, SMS, phone calls, and using different social media like WhatsApp or Facebook has made the cumbersome task easier and faster.
- There's an enormous demand for online educational resources (graphical, power point & educational videos) for virtual classes. Teachers have the chance to make such materials. Even the educators can establish knowledge banks for such useful resources
- Updating the knowledge and skillset of teachers now have much importance. Different types of short-term online courses and training are arranged to reinforce their skills which will help in their professional development. 'NATIONAL INITIATIVE for college HEADS AND TEACHERS HOLISTIC ADVANCEMENT' (NESTA) is an efficient program to coach the Heads of the faculties, resource persons, and teachers at the grade school level. This is mainly a 'capacity-building' program.

- Online mode has created a chance for teachers to find out ways to "learn and earn simultaneously" (Jena, 2020).
- Teachers could collaborate and work together which might improve learning. Forming a web community eases the burden and thus sharing makes things quite easier.
- Educators are becoming a chance to interact with peers from round the world thereby gaining from worldwide exposure.

Suggestions

Pandemic Covid-19 has created many challenges and opportunities within the field of education for all stakeholders. It's not very easy to beat those challenges but amidst those challenges better opportunities could be explored. A number of suggestions for teachers to handle issues created by Covid-19 are as pointed below:

1. Government/educational institutions should create awareness of online education to coach teachers in order that they overcome the difficulties of virtual mode and inculcate skills to make interesting virtual classroom situations for learners. The educators should be even trained in safety measures for learners and take measures to make awareness on cybersecurity which may be a growing issue in virtual mode.

2. Classroom Action Research is actually helpful for teachers to seek out what the scholars need. But more importantly, it's a tool for them to spot what requires to be enhanced and improved when teaching skills are involved. This identifies the initiative towards better teaching, and consequently, a far better quality of education. The shift towards online teaching mode all of a sudden has created certain issues reason being lack of awareness within the usage of technology, gaps in online pedagogy skills. These gaps got to be identified which needs tons of motivation on part of the teacher and thus develop a conducive classroom environment.

3. Planning of Active Learning as "It's not a lecture classroom online,". "It's a lively learning classroom online" as stated by a teacher of University of California. The teachers during online classes should not enter into lengthy explanations of the concept. Bradbury (2016) concluded in his study that lectures should be of 10 to 15 min. This duration of the lecture could only be retained by the modern learners. The study of Guo, Kim, and Rubin (2014) which explored that students' average engagement time regarding video clip was only six minutes. So prolonged lectures should be avoided so that the students do not get bored and become passive leading to distraction among them. The classes conducted virtually should have activities that should actively engage the learners. This would give chance to the learners for interaction and 'hands on experiential learning'. Given below are such strategies for active engagement of the learners-

- Learners' motivation, involvement and interest could be enhanced by the teacher in a web class, by permitting them to settle on 'how to learn'.
- Collaborative learning can make an immersive learning experience for college students.
- Employing a feed-forward technique rather than feedback, during which teachers should share the criteria for assessment and inform the learners about expectations from them and subsequently mark them. This valued technique makes the learners reflect on their output and assess themselves constantly.
- Using ICT Tools, Apps & Resources with innovation and experimentation: Benefits of ICT-enriched online education –
- o Is quickly accessible to anyone irrespective of age, race, gender, ability, disability etc. and whosoever is not into the mainstream, thus removing the barriers in learning. "For most people, technology makes things easier. For people with disabilities, technology makes things possible."-Mary Pat Radabaugh
- o Increases active participation, leads to lifelong learning

- o Helps in the enhancement of learner's capacity of modern technology viz. virtual and on line learning, web based learning, video conferencing, blog, e mail plays an important function, imbibing 21st century skills.
- o Using appropriate ICT tool to address individual learner and cater their needs differently and delivering personalized content. Cloud computing, Augmented learning, Game based learning are the tools which have the probability of reducing loads of bags, making teaching cheaper and more effective
- o ICT facilitates a teacher to reach out to the masses, can work in collaboration. Technology aids in filling the gap for the teachers and teacher educators who need to upgrade themselves as far as professional development is concerned. They can use inclusive and anticipatory ways of teaching and designing curriculum as well as preparation of the e- content feasibly.
- o Teachers being the heart of education process should possess all capacities to meet the challenges. Hence the pre service and in service teachers should be well versed in Constructivism philosophy and technology, which complements each other. Basis of the approach towards learning is that a child actively constructs knowledge through experience, and technology engages learners in the development of their constructions in a smoother way. Thus technology can equip constructivist teaching practice thereby enhancing the skills of trainees empowering them with opportunities to create an environment conducive to learning.
- o Studies have shown that retention is 70 percent higher in virtual reality and has huge impact on learning and retention of facts.
- o It enriches individual with multiple range of learning opportunities, inculcates exploring and discovering habits thereby enriching personal experiences.
4. A teacher should be given guidance on their performance through consistent observation and feedback of their class. This would definitely help them upgrade their skills. Strategically, focused interventions should be arranged to help them in identifying their learning gaps.
5. "DIKSHA" a project by the 'Ministry of human resources development' (MHRD), Government of India with objective of empowering teachers within the digital domain. This is a digital infrastructure for knowledge sharing. Courses for teachers are conducted for his or her continuance development in their noble profession. Varied teaching resources like teaching aids, educational materials etc. can be accessed and even uploaded by them. 'National Repository of Open Educational Resources' (NROER) launched in 2013 by MHRD and developed by NCERT, is an open digital resources platform for grades 1 to 12. Online available video audio documents and interactive contents in the repository can help the teachers to a great extent.

Conclusion

Though challenges have been created for the education system due to outbreak of COVID-19 yet immense better opportunities for acquiring new knowledge and skills in using different technologies have been explored by many educational institutions. On using varied technologies teachers can provide better interactive distance learning experience. Teachers are addressing the challenges created by the pandemic and successfully providing the support services for the benefits of the learners even in the time of crisis. But they too need support from the government and educational institutions who need to adopt certain policies so that the continuity in learning during the lockdown is maintained.

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