

The New Cultures of Learning

Pedagogy Online

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With online education, multimodal literacy is poised for a boom. To ensure that the enhancement made possible by this form of literacy reaches more demographics, a radical rethinking of pedagogics seems inevitable.

For many teachers and students, 2020 has been a year of experimentation. As early as March 2020, UNESCO documented that 87 per cent of the world's school children had been affected by COVID-related school closure and cessation of learning. Consequently, it called for a massive collaborative initiative which included (much maligned) techno-capitalists and state organizations, from Microsoft to Dubai Cares, from Khan Academy to Coursera, to address the challenge of keeping education going.

Adapting to online learning and teaching has been at best, a challenge, and at worst a nightmare. Beyond the usual anxieties and problems connected with the digital divide and built-in iniquities of a learning environment that forces both teachers and students to 'compress' instructional material into byte-sized packages, there are other matters that have drawn the attention of people in the field. Studies continue to advise and propose changes in assessment models, the format of instructional materials, the nature of interactions, among others. Recommendations that have come in, and being tested, from organizations such as the OECD include greater levels of engagement between parents and institutions, policies to support families and teachers, among others (<http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/strengthening-online-learning-when-schools-are-closed-the-role-of-families-and-teachers-in-supporting-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-c4ecba6c/>)

Concerning Learning

Reports by the government of Ontario supported non-profit organization, ContactNorth, examined key features of the new pedagogy, from blended learning to new forms of assessment.

A unique feature, they reported, was the rise of 'any size' learning: programmes that are not necessarily just the standard-size under-grad and MA/MSc model, but opted for short-term, certificate and diploma programmes. The demand for shorter, flexible, skill-oriented programs, ContactNorth noted, is set for an increase in an age of online-dominated learning.

Pre-recorded lessons, assessments and learning materials ensured that the learners were not limited by class hours and college/institutional timetables. Accessing (where access was possible) materials any time and from any place has introduced a whole new less-regimented (Foucault must

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*eSS Sunday Edit, Nayar on online education
December 28, 2020*

be worrying that the model of regimentation he discerned in schools is now dying!) system of learning. Concerns such as maintaining the levels of concentration or motivation during online classes have come up frequently in the discussions around online pedagogies. Questions of supportive learning environments at home – and this would be identity-specific, around, for example gender and race, indubitably – have also been raised, but without clear solutions. ‘Opportunity gaps’ in learning systems and access to education have been exacerbated, even in countries like the US, said a [study](#) from the Economic Policy Institute. A *Nature* editorial reported that as of September 2020, “850 million children and young adults — half of those enrolled in schools, colleges and universities worldwide — are not in education or training because of COVID-19” (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02709-3>). What is evident in all these reports is that online pedagogics is embedded in cultural politics, varied, uneven, institutional mechanisms everywhere in the world.

But ‘learning’ in its totality is *not* about books and classrooms and heated exchanges about political economy alone. Learning, in the broadest sense, also involves the negotiation of identities, social interaction and ‘coming-of-age’ responsibility- and decision-making abilities (as developmental psychologists will attest). Peer-work, peer-pressure, bullying, but also solidarity, relationships, developing and sharing coping mechanisms, and support work are a part of ‘learning’ – for which the campus is the site.

As the truism goes, learning is a lifelong process, but surely teachers (especially in a system where once you acquire a job as a professor, there is no inducement, requirement or enthusiasm to learn anything) did not expect it to come true. Thanks to COVID, this has indeed become an imperative. As one study, published in the *European Journal of Teacher Education* noted, “digital teacher competence and teacher education opportunities to learn digital competence” were key factors in adaptation to online teaching (the study was focused on Germany, but surely can be found to resonate with our people and systems as well). Other case studies, from specific contexts such as Mizoram, also documented the problems as well as opportunities of online education systems.

The teachers were the ones forced to acquire knowledge of the operations of GoogleMeet, Zoom, QuickTime and compression software. They had to adapt to Moodle and MOOCs. Periodic reminders from the regulatory authority of the Government of India (the University Grants Commission) to keep learning going via the online mode forced many to discover far more online resources – and learn to share them – than before (this excludes teachers whose publications had relied, with excess ‘significant overlap’, on online resources, thereby demonstrating a deftness in ‘sourcing’ materials, to put it politely).

Disembodied Interactionism

One study published in a recent issue of *Postdigital Science and Education* argued that three types of teaching presences may be needed for online teaching: cognitive, social and facilitatory. The

cognitive was all about ‘focusing on how teachers take into consideration students’ preparedness to participate in the online learning experience’; the social referred ‘to the social communication channels that teachers must open to maintain and possibly enhance the lost spontaneous student-student and student-teacher interaction’, and the functional was about ‘embracing teachers’ facilitatory discourse, direct instruction embodying tools/resources and mentoring activities.

‘Spontaneous’ in the above excerpt is a problematic word, it assumes that the teacher’s performance in the class, or that of the student/s, is not theatre and hence not rehearsed. Structured around power equations, rights discourses and the demands of a code of conduct, the theatre of learning is hardly spontaneous. The rhetoric and discourses are carefully framed, choice phrases employed, forms of behaviour regulated by written and unwritten rules. But, if one supposes that very often classroom debates are unstructured and can be contingent and co-produced by evolving arguments, they may be loosely described as ‘spontaneous’. The other points about the two types of teaching presence are well taken.

That said, and to play on the older heuristics of symbolic interactionism to address new forms of the learning environment, we can think of the online pedagogics now in force as demonstrating a ‘disembodied interactionism’.

Disembodied interactionism is not as bizarre as it sounds, from the perspective of a generation of learners who are already acclimatized and acculturated to avatars, role-playing games, image- and impression-management in the digital era. Digital natives – which would be the population in HEIs in India now – are more than familiar with online ‘presence’ and disembodied ‘avatars’. The process of manipulating and interacting with online presence calls for a redefinition of ‘presence’ itself.

The teacher’s presence is now on screen. It replaces the embodied teacher-presence with a new form of materiality (where there is live interaction, of course, online – it does not apply to pre-recorded lessons) itself. Thus, the very idea of the teacher’s presence is modified to capture the pixelated presence *as* full-presence.

The teacher’s position vis a vis the camera means that the camera stands in for the students’ collective gaze and by extension their presence. Different from the classroom, where the eyes are trained on the teacher’s physical presence, the online mode makes it possible that the student is watching an entirely different screen while being on camera in the classroom. The teacher sees the student but is the student watching the teacher at all? While we have as teachers long known that students in the real-time class are not always focused solely on the teachers (if they did, how would they stay awake?) – the ubiquitous passing of ‘chits’ now replaced by messaging and instagraming – the online world makes the very idea of embodied interaction, characteristic of the physical classroom, a complicated one.

The ‘presence’ of both teacher and learner generates a transmedia navigation in the online world. This involves dealing with the voice and video feed of the teacher in the ‘classroom’ but also

pursuing something *else* on the screen. Online teaching and learning recalls Henry Jenkins' famous 'convergence cultures' argument: the screen is where multiple cultures converge. The book has been redefined and writing has been extensively replaced by the image. Learning is no longer driven by the verbal language of the teacher, but by visual communication in the main.

A related point is the distributed cognition that is brought into play in an online classroom. The student employs multiple tools (audio, video, static images, animation, subtitles/verbal texts, drawing and writing tools, translations) that are useful for the expansion of intellectual competencies. Online pedagogics makes this distributed cognition a necessity because of the multimodal (visual, auditory and touch) nature of online learning. In a work from ten years ago, [Martin Engebretsen](#) wrote:

In the design, discursive content, semiotic resources and communicative intentions are joined together. But the interaction between these parts cannot be understood as a successive process, where one first defines content and thereafter selects a suitable form. Different semiotic modalities point towards different types of discursive content; different types of 'knowledge'.

This is precisely what is demonstrated in the forms of teaching-learning we have been forced to adopt: the form and content are not separable, delivery mechanisms for the content cannot be determined in advance, the arrangement of materials is not randomized, nor is their consumption.

Diffused Audience, Immersivity vs Interactivity

The audience for online learning environments is far more diffused than in the physical classroom.

Unlike a physical classroom where pedagogy is also influenced by the expression on the faces of students (albeit 'composed' for the teacher), the online environment makes the *sense* of an audience for the teacher a far more diffused one. The drama, the theatre of the classroom, with the Fourth Wall disruption built into it, is replaced by the address to a screened-in audience.

Whether this constitutes a different order of the immersive environment or an interactive one is a moot point. Where the physical classroom emphasized interactivity, the online mode (and mood) has foregrounded immersivity.

Interactivity is the modification and shifts in the very nature of the text based on the reader/audience. By moving along certain paths in the text (hyperlinked, or installation art) the reader activates a certain set of meanings and textual arrangements. Interactivity, as commentators and educators have argued, has been a key component in the empowerment of students who learn to enunciate despite linguistic handicaps, debate and argue within the class/campus. The spaces of the university, the college and the classroom, educators argue, are living spaces, and education is about the mode, nature and effects of interaction in these spaces, beyond the textbook and the lecture. The emphasis, one notes, is on the materiality of the space of the classroom, the embodied presence of teacher and learner, and the dramatic encounter (in some cases far too dramatic).

Immersive environments rely on a transparency of the medium, where the audience is given access to the very minds of characters (naturally, given my disciplinary training, I come to this via that most immersive of environments, the literary text) so that the audience experiences a I-was-there-ness, of being mentally and physically in the world of the story being told. Indeed, this degree of immersion was also taken as a negative feature of reading literature, most exemplified by Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote, who is described thus:

In short, he so immersed himself in those romances that he spent whole days and nights over his books; and thus with little sleeping and much reading, his brains dried up to such a degree that he lost the use of his reason.

'Reason', believes Cervantes, is the opposite of immersion.

In much contemporary theory, immersion has been portrayed as characterized by the loss of critical faculties and merely passive consumption of images and sounds. But surely immersivity requires a considerable amount of imagination as well: to be able to co-create with the inputs from texts/images/lectures, a theory, the world or a process in one's head is *not* passive reception but active work. However, this active work demands a whole new delivery mechanism for the content when the entire teaching-learning process is only online. How one repurposes the content of lectures so that the students' immersion in the virtual world of online talks, is active rather than passive, engages with far more of her/his cognitive faculties, requires more thought than this essay can muster up now. All one can say now is that for an environment to be educationally immersive, the objects (content) need to be those that demand an engagement – like in a plot – by the reader-learner.

If we assume, as some reports predict, that online learning will increase in both supply and demand, then there are several battles ahead: for learner concentration, retention of motivation, behaviour- and attitude- development modes, appropriate content delivery, addressing opportunity gaps, and the age-old immersivity versus interactivity conundrum. Empirical studies apart, cognitive studies of learners and teachers will be essential. Theorizing the very idea of pedagogy, of online spaces and virtual collectives – as they pertain to HEIs – will also be necessary.

Of all the technologies ever invented for human enhancement – and no, genetic enhancement is not the only one – literacy, as the bioethicist-philosopher Allen Buchanan has argued, has arguably been the single most influential one in history. With online education, multimodal literacy is poised for a boom. To ensure that the enhancement made possible by this form of literacy reaches more demographics, a radical rethinking of pedagogics seems inevitable.