Online Teaching and Its Impact on Journalism Educators

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Abstract

The current pandemic necessitated a shift towards the online mode of the teaching-learning process. This article examines the pros and cons of the online classroom for journalism educators. The findings of this research show that while the virtual mode has benefitted imparting of journalism education, yet, it does not necessarily subscribe to the view that conventional classrooms are outmoded or that the teaching-learning process has to shift entirely to the online mode. On the contrary, an attempt needs to be made to reconcile the two – the conventional and the online mode and aim towards blended learning. The findings of this study show that one cannot privilege the online mode over the conventional face to face teaching method, but see how well the two modes can be integrated to provide a wholesome learning experience for students of Journalism. Constructive suggestions have also emerged from this research study on ways in which the online classroom and teaching methodologies can be improved for imparting journalism education.

Keywords: *Technological determinism, effective communication, virtual media laboratories, blended learning*

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic triggered a shift to the online mode of teaching in educational institutions and universities all over the

country. While the pandemic contingency necessitates a change towards the virtual mode of teaching, this has nonetheless triggered questions about its efficacy and sustainability. The research study examines the impact of the online classroom, specifically in the context of imparting journalism education. The aims and objectives of Journalism programmes in universities all over the country are to impart both theoretical and skill-oriented knowledge to students in the sphere of media. The Journalism curriculum broadly covers the areas of print, broadcast and digital media to enable students to understand the characteristics of each media, content creation and the process of news and message transmission. The students are taught to think critically, prepare content for different media, understand ethical issues and contemporary current affairs topics. The positive impact of online journalism classes has undoubtedly been the ability to share news videos, discussions from TV and online debates on current affairs topics, which enables students to develop wide-ranging perspectives as they hear expert voices with diverse views. Besides this, power point presentations enable journalism teaching faculty to show students the right way to edit news copy by giving suitable examples. There is greater scope and access to expert voices in the journalistic field from both within the country and abroad, who can be invited to deliver talks to students on the online platforms. Such online accessibility to experts from the media field proves to be a great asset for the discipline of journalism since this gives students the exposure to multiple perspectives. Classroom lectures supplemented with digital content in the form of videos, news texts from online newspapers and magazines, photographs, documentaries and film clips do make learning more interesting and effective for students. This enhances the retentive power of the students as visual images have a lasting impact on the minds of the viewers - in this case the students. When each student has his/her own laptop or I-pad or phone, the focus of the student is more intense than a collective viewing in the physical classroom. One finds that students' responses are quick, sharp and more nuanced because of their

concentrated viewing and listening on the digital mode. This enhances the retentive power of the students as visual images, PPTs, videos leave a lasting imprint on the minds of students. It facilitates discussions between learners and also between the teacher and the learner.

Technology is useful for teaching purposes. American Sociologist Veblen (1857-1929), attempted to study how society evolves over time, and suggested that technology may be a driving force of societal and institutional change, contributing to the concept that is known as "technological determinism". This concept of technological determinism propounded by Veblen, when applied to education, is the idea that technology has an impact on the teaching-learning process. While the positives in the context of imparting journalistic education were mentioned earlier, the negative impact too needs to be factored in. Adler (2006) while discussing the soft variant of technological determinism (TD) argues that "technology is one important force amongst others, while hard TD argues that technology is the main or the only significant driver; anti-TD views assert that technology is "neutral," and that its effects are mainly or entirely a function of social context" (*ibid* Adler 2006: 1). As is true of many other areas where there is an interface between technology and society, we find technological innovations do cause disruption in teaching in a number of ways. Again, it is true that crisis resulting from technological innovations makes society to renew itself, albeit in a disruptive way. The emergence of disruptive innovation is a time of risk and uncertainty, but it is also a time of opportunities, bringing talent and innovation to the education system. "By definition, a disruption implies a sudden break or interruption. When applied to education, disruption involves a break from traditional, established educational models of knowledge trans-mission." (Morales et al 2021:2).

Discussion and debates on news and current affairs cons-titutes a major aspect of journalism education. The virtual, online

platform whilst facilitating discursive opportunities, suffers from the constraints of both physical and semantic noise. Physical noise on online platforms is related to technological factors, such as poor transmission quality, connectivity issues, audio interruptions, among other factors. When discussions with students get animated in the digital classroom, the audio disturbances often impede the clarity of communication. At the semantic level, the problem of interpretations, signs and language codes remains a common challenge both in the online and conventional face to face classroom. Another important aspect is that of journalistic research. The inaccessibility to primary news sources for research makes it difficult for students pursuing media research projects. Secondary news sources based on web searches become the only option for students. The difficulties in distinguishing fake online news sources from genuine ones result in lowering standards of research quality for journalism students.

Literature review

For the purpose of this research, it is important to distinguish between the concepts pertaining to the "use of technology in learning" versus "online and blended learning". The former concept refers to technological resources, processes, and systems needed to improve or manage the learning process. On the other hand, online and blended learning refer to education via the internet or any electronic means. The advantages of e learning and educational technology are the instant access to information. The World Wide Web is a boon for both learners and educators. For learners, it facilitates learning at their own pace and makes learning interactive and stimulating as a number of e resources facilitate the learning process. From the standpoint of educators, various software tools make it easier to impart lessons and skillsets to students with the aid of learning materials. Educational technology is vital for imparting Journalism since it has the software and

wherewithal that is required for imparting skillsets to students of this discipline.

A number of studies on the impact of online education on both teachers and students were reviewed for this article. A study by van der Spoel (2020) on teachers' online teaching expectations and experiences during the Covid19 - pandemic in the Netherlands, showed that professionalization of teachers, such as characteristics of teachers and intentions to implement technology in teaching impacted the teaching-learning process. Another study by Shea, Picket and Li (2005) has assessed the aspect of increasing access to higher education through the perspective of diffusion of innovation. The study points out that "while online learning remains a relatively small segment of the entire higher education curriculum, better understanding of how this innovation may be successfully diffused to a wider audience of faculty, will enable institutions to grow to meet a larger portion of the demand for higher education in the years ahead" (Shea e*t al* 2005: 18). A similar study on the impact of online learning during Covid-19, surveys the perspectives of both teachers and students. The afore-mentioned study by Nambiar (2020) points out that face-to-face learning was perceived more positively than online learning in term of social presence, interaction, satisfaction and overall quality. Even though online classes were reported to be convenient in terms of saving time, still both teachers as well as the students perceived it to be less effective and structured when compared to the physical classroom mode of learning. The concept of blended learning may be the new classroom in future which would combine "several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, Web-based courses, EPSS, and knowledge management practices. Blended learning is also used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning" (Valiathan 2002: 1).

A study by Guidry & Lambert (2021) of online teaching during the Covid pandemic investigates the nature of student

engagement in the online learning environment. The study attempts to find out "if student and institutional characteristics affect the use of the learning technologies and their impact on student engagement" (1222). The results of the study point to a positive relationship between web-based learning technology use and student engagement and desirable learning outcomes. The findings of a study on "Student Views of Effective Online Teaching in Higher Education" by Young (2006) found that students rated the best courses as the ones in which instructors demanded more assignments and work of high standard from the students. Students also cited flexibility as one of the advantages of online courses. While the literature on this topic has primarily been generalized studies on the impact of online classrooms on higher education, there have not been any specific studies related to the imparting of journalism education. Mahmoud (2021) provides instructional strategies for online teaching in Covid -19 Pandemic, emphasizing upon slow vocal pace by teachers during online teaching and sharing resources prior to the class could make online classes more interactive with students. He further suggests collaboration between the higher education commissions and telecommunications industries to improve Internet connectivity-related issues. Ensuring feedback from students and flexible teaching and assessment policies were the other instructional strategies suggested.

Methodology

This research study seeks to understand the impact of online teaching on journalism educators. The research questions that this study seeks to explore are:

1. What challenges do journalism educators face while conducting online classes?

2. What are the suitable ways in which the online mode of teaching can be improved for students of journalism?

The method used for this qualitative research study is in-depth interviews. Dworkin states that "the sample size used in qualitative research methods is often smaller than that used in quantitative research" (2012: 1319). The justification offered is that qualitative research tries to achieve in-depth understanding by focusing on meaning, the how and why of an issue. In-depth interviews do not make generalizations to a larger population but attends to "how the lived experience of participants can be understood" (1319). For the purpose of this study, online interviews were conducted with 15 Journalism faculty members drawn from different universities and colleges across India. The interviews conducted for this research attempted to explore the views and experiences of teaching faculty in imparting journalism education via the online mode. The qualitative interview technique provided an in-depth insight into the advantages and challenges in conducting online classes for the discipline of journalism. The respondents were also asked to provide suggestions on how journalism education via the digital mode could be improved to make it more productive for both teaching faculty members and students. A qualitative assessment of their responses was made to understand how online classes impacted upon the teaching-learning process in journalism education.

Results and analysis

As a faculty member of Journalism, the online teaching mode has helped me in deploying innovative teaching strategies such as the development of new learning materials, provide space between visual viewing and the listening mode, and bring about a transformation in the learners in the way they absorb and use knowledge, making it more participatory. This is the real challenge which is in every sense a real advantage, making teaching less teacher-centric and more student-centric. Among the several causes for this lop-sidedness is that students are becoming passive participants during online classes. Minimum vocabulary,

maximum student participation and maximum outcomes are the challenge before the teaching faculty. Eye-to eye contact is the sine qua non in any mode of teaching. The facility in the digital platforms to switch off the video, results in no eye-contact between students and teaching faculty. This makes it difficult to elicit student participation while taking classes via online platforms. The connectivity between the teacher and the student is easier in face-to-face conventional teaching.

The lack of interactivity was a recurring observation made by the respondents. One of the journalism faculty members mentioned that initially when she started teaching via the online mode, she experienced "an utter sense of despair and frustration". She attributed this despair and frustration to the online mode wherein she could not hear the chatter of the class, could not see the reactions of the students and found the transition to this mode sudden without any warning to which all fell in line without a complaint. In her words, "Given that the way we started, did not remain constant and is still in a fluid condition. Now we have figured out our ways of managing our awkwardness to manage our screen shadows, got used to talking to blank display circles, stopped asking if we are making sense and randomly pointing out individual names to 'catch the culprit', build dialogues with 'human' perceptions that we have built based on our experience of interacting with those virtual selves." She further went on to explore 'power' equations in the classroom to state that the teachers who had conceptual understanding of 'power' lost out completely since here the technology was holding all the power and students controlled to a large extent if they want to 'interact' or not!'

Effective communication which involves exchange of information, ideas and knowledge requires that the presentation by the sender is rightly decoded by the receiver. Some of the major facets of effective communication are the importance of non-verbal cues, feedback, discussion and debate, active listening, using humour and maintaining an atmosphere of congeniality in any

communication setting, and in this study - the classroom. As pointed out by Young "participants in an online course have a responsibility to each other to communicate in a timely and professional manner."(2006: 73) Several faculty members pointed to the inability to see the students and react to their facial expressions and other subtle non-verbal cues like confusion or lack of focus, among others. The inability to have face to face mentor-mentee sessions is a drawback of the online teaching mode. The lack of a human connection between students and teachers is a challenge posed in the online classroom. As pointed out by a Communications' professor from a leading post-graduate media institute, "knowing your students as individuals, students getting to know their teachers as people, and us together knowing close hand people about whom we research and tell stories", all of this is not possible in the online classroom.

On the aspect of imparting journalism and communication studies on the online mode, an observation pertained to the lack of hands-on experience for students as most of the practical work was done virtually with the help of mobile phones or laptops. "The physical interaction with the industry ecosystem was completely missing. Virtual tours of studios and demonstration of broadcasting equipment in an online class became a substitute for their practical work", observed a Professor and Director of a leading higher education university in Karnataka.

The barriers of inaccessibility, unstable internet connectivity and technical problems were highlighted by a number of journalism educators. As expressed by a professor from the university of Mysore, "teachers' and students' comfort with online class design, structure, level of interaction between students and faculty, the quality and amount of class content, technical support, and overall experience with online class delivery impact the overall teaching and learning experience".

Another observation by a faculty member of a leading university in Delhi was that the online classroom had a behavioural impact upon the students. She highlighted that this abrupt shift to the virtual mode caused fatigue, stress, emotional imbalance in students as they were subjected to prolonged hours of screen viewing. She noted that the "ill effects of un-socialized teaching needs to be factored in as we absorb and accept the change" to the online mode.

The online classroom is useful for teaching various aspects of Print Journalism, since teachers can access online newspapers and use Canva and other software packages, like Indesign and Adobe Photoshop to teach print news editing and newspaper/magazine design layouts. However, teaching of Broadcast Journalism gets limited on the online mode, since video shooting that involves camera techniques as well as film editing can be effectively imparted only in face-to-face teaching and learning. Besides, Photo Journalism also requires the imparting of knowledge pertaining to photo lenses, light and other facets that only suit the physical classroom mode of teaching. These challenges restrict the course delivery to mere propagation of theoretical concepts on these branches of journalism that make such online classes less engaging for students.

Discussion

The discipline of journalism is based on the principles of communication. The teacher-student interface in journalistic education, both in conventional and digital classrooms, is founded on the model of group communication. Participation and sharing of information are both central to group communication. Communication in its root meaning refers to 'commonness' and the group which succeeds best is the group that has greatest degree of commonness. The possibilities of interaction between the faculty and students do not get inhibited by digital technologies. On the contrary, the latest technological advancements in Google

classroom, zoom and other platforms have any enabling effect on the teaching-learning process. However, findings of this study establish that faculty members are not able to elicit interactive responses from learners. Some of the suggestions which emerge from the research study are that in order to elicit responses from students of Journalism, they need to be given opportunities to participate, actively think and thereby get more interactive by encouraging discussions in online classes. The teacher should not be the sole information provider. Students too should be encouraged to participate, share information, and contribute topics for discussion. Students should be honed to become strategic communicators which is vital for those pursuing Journalism since as journalists they are involved in message dissemination. Students also need to develop the spirit of working in teams both as team builders and as active team members. Pre-class and post-class activities need to be created in the online classrooms to make learning more interesting for students. There should be instructor involvement in the discussions and in communicating with the students and providing constant feedback on their work. Students should develop the spirit of working in teams both as team builders and as active team members. Effective instructors can create an atmosphere that encourages students to collaborate and interact with their classmates, their instructor, and the course material.

Other findings have also emerged from the qualitative assessment of interview responses on ways to improve online teaching for journalism educators. Efforts need to be made to improve learning outcomes for students on the virtual mode. This can be done by improving online class structures and course design for journalism subjects. Various service providers need to be engaged for improving the quality of online classes with support from different colleges and universities, which can help in making the virtual mode of education more effective and suitable all across the educational institutions of the country. Journalism educators also need to explore the prospect of establishing and engaging virtual media laboratories to train students for production,

distribution and analysis of media content. Such a virtual media laboratory is a tool for distance learning and experimentation that allows people to share knowledge, data, voice, video, tools, and many other resources. It provides a suitable environment to extend, improve, integrate, refine, and assist the learning and experimentation process in many subject areas, thus contributing to an increase in the effectiveness of media research and widening the use of scarce or costly equipment/ software via the online platforms. Journalism educators need to identify virtual media labs that can partner colleges and universities in training students in skills required for jobs in the industry. In this way they can get training from experts in areas of media production, research and content creation. In the United States where virtual media labs have proliferated, faculty, students, and researchers work together on hundreds of projects. Media Lab alumni and researchers go on to careers in research and academia; to become entrepreneurs; to bring their unique skills and insights to industry; or to become independent designers, artists, inventors, and consultants. Another vital area is development journalism. Virtual media labs that handle development projects can be invited to collaborate with universities and colleges so that students can actively participate in community-driven activities and develop sensitivity towards social and developmental issues. Through these free sessions, Journalism educators and students can build skills in media production and editing, explore apps to make project-based learning come to life in less time and for less cost. Opportunities are immense but getting funding for such collaborative efforts would be a challenge. It requires convincing educational institutions to set aside funds for collaborative ventures with virtual media labs that are currently operating globally.

On concerns of lack of accessibility, the suggestions that emerged were for creating a structured and user-friendly environment for the online mode of education, one that is accessible for all without putting any financial burden on students and teachers. There is need for learning outcomes to be flexible factoring

in student difficulties and emergencies that come in the way of smooth functioning of online classes. Emphasis was laid on faculty training for successful online class implementation. Faculty needs to make full use of tools such as Zoom breakout rooms, white board, wikis for class-related discussions on news and current affairs topics which are vital in disciplines like Journalism. The need for teachers to maintain empathy and positivity in their interactions with students on the digital mode and evolve creative ways to enhance both real-time and pre and post class engagement is needed. An interesting suggestion that emerged from the research study is for the need to follow strict online classroom protocols both for students and teachers just as in a physical classroom since blended learning may become the norm in future.

By and large, the findings of this study point to the need for the disciplines of journalism and mass communication to interface at an accelerated pace with the industry to provide skills and newer methods of production and delivery to students on the virtual mode since students seek employment or career opportunities. The other challenge is the need to incorporate new aspects of journalism into online teaching besides the routine syllabus. Data journalism is a new emerging area. Students should be encouraged to understand and interpret data and submit articles on the same. If colleges and universities can enter into collaborations with virtual media labs, it would be possible to get the expertise to train students in data journalism so that they learn to make sense of data, analyse data, and aspects of visualization and story-telling, essentially converting data into meaningful information in their journalistic reports. Besides Data journalism, Drone journalism is another fast-emerging field and students could get training from virtual media labs in learning how they can use a small unmanned aircraft to gather photos, videos, and data for journalism.

Today we are inundated with digital pedagogies and we indeed face a perplexing challenge of selectivity and evaluation. We have to make a wise selection of digital pedagogies that can work

best for journalism course structures offered in Indian universities and educational institutions. Faculty members and researchers working at colleges and universities should collaborate with the existing virtual media labs in creating and developing suitable digital pedagogies that suit our local academic framework. The approach to the Indian media classroom of tomorrow should be a blended learning approach to provide students maximum opportunities to participate, actively think and get more interactive by encouraging discussions in online classes.

We are familiar with the views of Veblen on technological determinism whereby technology is considered as the prime factor in bringing about societal changes. In the case of online education, we find technology as a prime mover in changing the way we teach and communicate. However, technology is not an unalloyed blessing since it lacks the active human intervention to encourage participation of all stakeholders. Student online education needs active interaction and participatory communication between teachers and students. The discourse in classrooms needs to shift so that teachers and students are both viewed as thinkers – in-partnership who bring valuable knowledge and ideas to the discourse situation.

What is required is adapting to student needs, providing meaningful examples from news, current affairs, development issues, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course to deliver a valuable outcome, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning. In an online classroom, these aspects may enhance connections between the instructor, the students, and the course content.

For online journalism classrooms, an important aspect pertains to incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching which enables students to get an exposure to lectures from diverse disciplines like environment studies, geo-politics, science, other liberal arts disciplines. The online technology facilitates lectures

from all parts of the globe whereby scholars both from within India and from abroad can be invited to give lectures online that will greatly benefit the students of journalism. One needs to cultivate among journalism students the idea of community-driven journalism rather than simply catering to market-driven industrial needs. The findings of this study point out that journalism education needs to evolve effective course structures that comprise of a judicious mix of both theoretical concepts and journalistic skills that suitably fit the online mode of teaching. In the post-Covid scenario, the general view among educational practitioners is that flexible modes of learning may soon be the pattern of education with either hybrid or blended learning modes that are here to stay. Flexible-mode courses offer education in multiple modes, both physical classes and online ones that give students the option on how they would choose to take their course. For journalism educators, flexible-mode courses may prove beneficial since they could effectively blend both theory and practice, which journalism courses of study demand.

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