COVID 19: THE CHAOS AND THE NEW DAWN FOR PEDAGOGY IN THE HUMANITIES

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ABSTRACT

2020 will be remembered as a monumental year in the evolution of education across the world. The Pandemic has not only forced educators to re-imagine the classroom as a place of no physical interaction but it has also brought to the surface, issues that have ailed the educational system for a long time. The pandemic has thus worked as a catalyst in making educational systems face their practical and market-situated realities in the time of a global health and financial crisis. This paper aims to analyse various issues surrounding this transformation and present suggestions for an educational system that is best suited for a world struggling with a global pandemic.

KEYWORDS: *Covid-19, Pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has delivered a tragic and almost fatal blow to higher education across the world. With colleges and universities shut for close to half a year, the question of examinations for final semester students in suspended animation, the layoff of teachers[1], the drop in recruitments[2], the totalising and sudden technological overhaul of teaching and learning methods, the consequences of a digital divide, the anxiety about the future for students, scholars and recent recruits, this metaphorical Pandora's box keeps spewing out challenges like torrential rain. As this gory picture presents us, we also find ourselves more often amidst a growing number of outlier ideas. Ideas that see an opportunity to reform the institution of higher education at a structural and elemental level. From visions of grading reform to no-human-contact classrooms, the radical branch of a post-human future seems to be closing in. As we explore some of these ideas and challenges and investigate the landscape of a post-COVID-19 pedagogy we must keep in mind that disciplines like Humanities have faced a persistent and serve existential crisis even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Issues ranging from budgetary limitations to employment generation, and the gradual decrease in enrolment for graduate and postgraduate courses to challenges in research outputs, Humanities have struggled to compete with other disciplines even before the

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[1] An Education Week report suggests that America has already seen thousands of educators laid off this summer due to the pandemic, while more are expected. Read more at: https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/07/14/thousands-of-teachers-laid-off-already-due.html. At the Ohio University (Athens, Ohio) at least 140 staff members are expected to be laidoff and the university has started issuing non-renewal notices to both non-tenure and tenure-track faculty in efforts to deal with a budgetary crisis that existed even before the pandemic. Smaller departments of Humanities are in particular danger with this rising trend. More on this can be found at: http://dailynous.com/2020/05/04/faculty-non-renewals-staff-layoffs-threats-philosophy-ohio-university/

[2] Some estimate that 60-65 per cent interviews getting dropped or delayed due to the pandemic. Read more at: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/jobs/covid-19-to-delay-job-interviews-impact-hiring-experts/articleshow/74757861.cms

pandemic.[3] As the pandemic pushes underfunded and struggling disciplines into a race for a complete overhaul of operational practices, everything about the traditional education system is under scrutiny. A survivalist, often progressive point of view that seems to side with change and calls for an overhaul argues that the struggle for the Humanities is an accurate representation of its free-market fate and only a traditionalist and almost unnecessary view romanticises the attempts to save the Humanities. Change, for both points of view, is inevitable, as the pandemic has situated the Humanities such that an unavoidable technological fury seems to be finally knocking down its door.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper follows mixed-method research i.e. quantitative and qualitative. The paper uses primary data and a primary survey along with concerns emerging from a global discourse of academicians, educators, students and administrators to evaluate the landscape of online pedagogy and present a prospective model that addresses these concerns. A sample-survey of 1,454 participants was carried out at the end of IN-DEPTH a five-day International E-Learning Workshop organised by the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University in June 2020. 97.2% of those surveyed are Indian and the rest from Sri Lanka and Canada. 46.5% of participants are teachers, 36.7% are students and 16.9% are research scholars. 69.2% of all participants identified as living in an urban area and 30.8% identified as living in a rural area. The workshop and the survey were conducted online.

Apprehensions and Clarity: The Online Vs. The Physical Classroom and the Types of Online Education

As the COVID-19 lockdowns and general protocols of self-distancing ensured that traditional classroom study could not be pursued, institutions across India rushed to online teaching alternatives that they had never tried before. With faculty and students trained and acclimated to the tried and tested offline methods, a general apprehension is noted among faculty, students and even parents of the students regarding the efficacy and validity of the new age online teaching. In an article published in The Hindu, titled Seven Myths About Online Education, A. Joseph Dorairaj, Dean, School of English & Foreign Languages, Gandhigram Rural Institute took to debunking some of these apprehensions. One myth he pointed to stated that students preferred Face-to-Face interaction as opposed to online teaching. The survey conducted at the end of IN-DEPTH, an International 5-day E-Learning Workshop organised by the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University revealed an insight into this particular opinion that Dorairaj categorises as a myth and attempts to debunk.

Figure 1 shows Out of the 1,454 participants that took part in the survey a majority of 46.1 % preferred an E-Learning experience over the physical interaction of a traditional classroom. A surprisingly large 35.1 % of the participants remained undecided over their preference between the physical classroom and Online/E-Learning alternatives. This coupled with 18.8% who preferred the physical classroom, reveals that a clear consensus has still not been reached about the apprehensions of the new modes being employed in the wake of the pandemic. Although continuing efforts by private and public higher education institutions are trying to address this lack of consensus, the apprehension about the new modes of teaching and learning has numerous contributing factors, many beyond the reach of institutions that we will discuss later.

At the beginning of a discussion about the on-going discourse regarding the shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning methods, a point of clarity needs to be achieved about the distinction and merits of the various types

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[3] You can read more about the trend of declining admissions to Humanities in Beth McMurtrie's article "Can you get students interested in the humanities again?"https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20191109053633715

of these new modes. E.g. between live interaction i.e. Online Audio-Video Conferencing, E-Learning and a Mixed-Method evolution of E-Learning that seems to be finding preference today. The Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University has been conducting several E-Learning Workshops during the lockdown and has closely observed the challenges involved with such new mediums, and has attempted to comprehend and develop the most efficient model for teaching through these new modes. An Online mode of teaching while preserving some of the benefits of face-to-face interaction is beset with challenges of reliable technical infrastructure that needs to exist at the end of the sender and the receiver. Without such a reliable infrastructure, the Online Audio-Video Conferencing mode of teaching and learning becomes a gimmick. Even in the specific circumstances where such a reliable infrastructure does exist the learning curve for teachers and students reveals a challenge. Online conferencing modes have seen disruptive and even racist incidents of indiscipline have been noted, pointing to the lack of control and adequate learning environment that is on offer through this method. [4] Another challenge that seems to plague this mode is the failure of the remote attendance. A Wall Street Journal report stated that "only 27% of districts required teachers to record whether students participate in remote classes"[5]. The growing trend of signing into online classes and not participating in it is another worrying issue. Regulatory practices and the maturation of the learning curve stand in the way of LIVE teaching becoming a valid replacement for physical classrooms. Further, Spiros Protopsaltis and Sandy Baumi in their paper titled *Does Online Education Live Up To Its Promise? A Look At The Evidence And Implications For Federal Policy (2019)* demonstrates that "Online education has failed to improve affordability, frequently costs more, and does not produce a positive return on investment." (Pg.2)

The E-Learning method, on the other hand, offers pre-recorded lectures and reading material to participants to be accessed in a wide range of time and finds merit in the option to be accessed and consumed at the receiver's convenience. It also removes the issue of disruptive classes and provides an opportunity for valid attendance to be marked via assignments. By offering participants an opportunity to put up their queries and making sure that teachers respond to these queries through an online chat platform, email or even documents addressing the queries, the simple E-Learning method evolves to maintain interaction between students and teacher. The E-Learning mode of teaching can be assisted by adding a component of LIVE interaction for discussion and queries in the future when LIVE interaction occurs through a reliable medium. The reliability of which can be assured by reducing the size of online classes. Smaller online classrooms provide an opportunity to have a more streamlined and reliable alternative to physical classrooms given that infrastructural limitations are addressed on both ends. Our survey seems to show a clear preference among students, scholars and teachers for an E-Learning mode over Online/Live interaction classes.

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[4] Elizabeth Redden takes note of these particular challenges that seem to have arisen at the offset of the Online Teaching efforts. Zoom and other applications have since made changes to their operating practices to ensure a reduction in these incidents but there is still a lot left to be desired, especially when comparing to the traditional classroom. Elizabeth Redden's article can be read here: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/03/26/zoombombers-disrupt-online-classes-racist-pornographic-content
[5] Regulatory practices aside the LIVE teaching method has a long learning curve before a majority of these challenges are addressed. You can find the Wall Street Journal report here: https://www.wsj.com/articles/failure-in-the-virtual-classroom-11592776152

Would you prefer studying like this from the comfort of your home over studying in a physical
classroom?
1,454 responses

● Yes
● No
● Maybe

35.1%

18.8%

46.1%
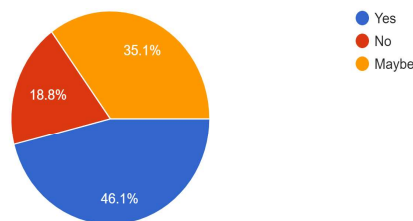
Figure 1: Source: Author's Illustration.

Which online medium do you prefer for learning?
1,454 responses

● Online/LIVE Sessions
● E-Learning / Pre- recorded material

74%

26%
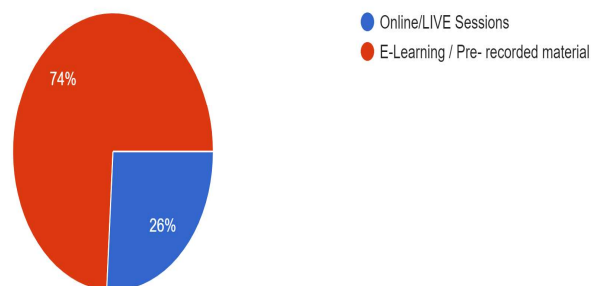
Figure 2: Source: Author's Illustration.

The New-Teacher and the Transformation

"Professors who agree—as they are doing en masse—to submit to the new dictatorship of telematics and to hold their courses only online are the perfect equivalent of the university teachers who in 1931 swore allegiance to the Fascist regime. As happened then, it is likely that only fifteen out of a thousand will refuse, but their names will surely be remembered alongside those of the fifteen who did not take the oath." (Giorgio Agamben, Requiem for the Students, www.medium.com) [8]

The role of the teacher has evolved through history from the Socratic role to the student-centric one of the modern time but through its evolutionary history, it has perhaps never faced as big a challenge as the existential one that the current pandemic lays before it. Due to the globalised diversification of disciplines, the market-driven trends of private institutions and the continuous rise of technology (that infringe on the role of the teacher), the landscape of education has slowly but

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[8] It should be noted that though Agamben generally responds to specific development in Italy, his observations here are applicable to a global trend in higher education in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The quote is from a translation of a short intervention by Agamben that appeared on Diario della crisi (a blog) at the website of the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici on May 23, 2020. The complete translated text can be read at:
https://medium.com/@ddean3000/requiem-for-the-students-giorgio-agamben-866670c11642

surely been transforming itself for a post-human future where it is fast becoming possible to imagine an education system where the role of human-teachers is irreversibly reduced if not completely done away with. The Humanities as a discipline has been relatively slow in accepting technology in its practices. Teachers have been trained in traditional physical classroom teaching methods and syllabi have never demanded (or at least hardly received) technological impetus. Although the last few decades have seen an acknowledgement on the part of the Humanities of this self-distancing from technology with digital tools and topics encouraged in research, the technology-driven teaching and learning remain a big challenge for the Humanities. In a situation where teachers are working with a looming dread of lay-offs or non- renewal of contracts, teachers must deal with the gargantuan task of reimaging their disciplines, finding new and reliable teaching methods, learning new technology and making their students comfortable with it and also validating their disciplines to the market perceptions. Hua Hsu, Associate Professor of English at Vassar College and a staff writer at The New Yorker equates academia as "a refuge from the exigencies of the rest of the world" ("The Purpose of Our Profession Is at Risk", www.chronicle.com). Noting that the allure of academia for many is to pursue knowledge at a comfortable distance from markets, politics and bottom-line policies. But academicians today must testify to their validity to these very politico-economic forces which as is seen these days are noted for producing rifts within academic ranks. Tenure, non-tenured, contractual, ad-hoc all seem to be castaways on the Coral Island from The Lord of the Flies. Such a circumstance, at the deep end of the pool, situates academicians such that the purpose of critical inquiry and the profession itself may be lost in attempts to just financially survive.

Looking at the financial challenges that respond to this situatedness of teachers, it should be noted that the previous financial challenges like the slowdown of 2008-09 affected educational institutions in either the expenditure or the revenue but the present crisis initiated by the pandemic has dried institutions on both ends. Admissions are expected to drop further in disciplines that had been seeing a steady decline before the pandemic (mostly from the Humanities), campus housing, hostels, eateries, etc. are likely to yield lower returns and expenditures for incorporating new online technologies are likely to go up, further followed by expenditures in the execution of SOPs when physical classes and residency would begin. Jonathan Kramnick in an article for The Chronicle for Higher Education titled *The Humanities after COVID-19* notes,

"With respect to jobs in the literary humanities, moreover, the 2008-9 crises arrived at a point of relative stability, if not expansion. It's what came next that matters. Jobs fell off dramatically and then never quite returned. The present job loss builds on the former with a vengeance. There wasn't that much hiring to freeze anyway, and now there is none. In these respects, we are in uncharted territory. At the extreme, we should contemplate the end of intellectual continuity and transformation from one generation to the next."

Such a dreadful financial environment presents a particular challenge for recent recruits and PhD scholars who had trained for and aspired to a career in academia. If the circumstance remains the same, various disciplines will see numerous participants changing fields after getting to the pinnacle of institutional education. "An entire generation or two that fails to find work neither carries on nor challenges a field of knowledge. In its place, there is a long gap of immense human and intellectual loss" (Kramnick) Thus, the ironic circumstance for the Humanities is this,

Disciplines must re-imagine themselves

- In what would grant them relevance with the times

- In technology-driven Modus Operandi, relinquishing the tradition of teaching and learning practices that have distinguished them so far

  Finding market-validity and acquiring budgetary relaxations

  Choosing between retraining tenured faculty or hiring and training new faculty.

Each of the tasks above is mammoth in nature and would ideally require the concerted effort of a stable tradition of critical and reformative inquiry, young and innovative disciples and encouraging financial and ideology confidence from institutional management. Thus the anxious dread for teachers and students alike is justified and especially for those who are from the Humanities.

The Digital Divide and the Democratization of Learning

The Internet has long been hailed as the force that unites. Many have envisioned Internet breaking down social, economic and even cultural divides. And there are numerous occasions in the last few decades where the success of the internet in doing so has been lauded. With the pandemic of 2020, the internet has been forced into playing a greater role in various industries, most notably in education. Agnes Callard presents the image of academia as an institution surrounded by two walls. One of "physical exclusivity" and the other of "intellectual esotericism" (Callard). The shift to online teaching and learning has in Callard's view lowered the wall of "physical exclusivity". Online education offers a lucrative opportunity for cost-saving for educational institutions, with students studying from their homes, the cost of maintaining physical classrooms, hostels, residency and cafeteria infrastructure has come down, recorded lectures and e-learning material has allowed for reuse, the reuse, in turn, means that institutions can compromise on quality by keeping fewer teachers on the payroll. Some believe that this cost-cutting would, in the long run, bring down admission fees and even the criteria for enrolment into various courses. Thus, bringing down the wall of physical exclusivity for academia. An overzealous reliance on the optimistic outcomes of such a scenario, however, does come across caution even in the developed world. Patrick Deneen, Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame notes that in a post corona world "The prominent show of concerns over diversity and inclusion will ring hollow to a growing number of un-and underemployed workers from every race and class, while the most privileged will continue to manipulate the system to gain admission for their children" (Patrick Deneen, Hope Among the Ruins, Chronicle.com). Even if one entertains the possibility that cost-cutting by shifting to an online alternative of education can bring about the collapse of the physical exclusivity of academia such a hypothetical model if tried can only spell disaster in developing countries where the essential infrastructure for online education does not exist. On July 2, 2020, news emerged of a man from Tripura committing suicide after failing to buy a smartphone for his daughter's online classes.[9] In June of the same year, a 15-year-old student of Class 10 from the Chirang district of Assam committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree because his father was not able to buy him a smartphone to attend the online classes started by the state Education Department following the COVID-19 pandemic[10]. A sudden and hasty shift to online classes is seen across the world. In countries like India, where the process of online education had not been initiated at large, before the pandemic, such a sudden shift could likely strengthen the wall of exclusivity around education. Referring to Mission Antyodaya, a report on
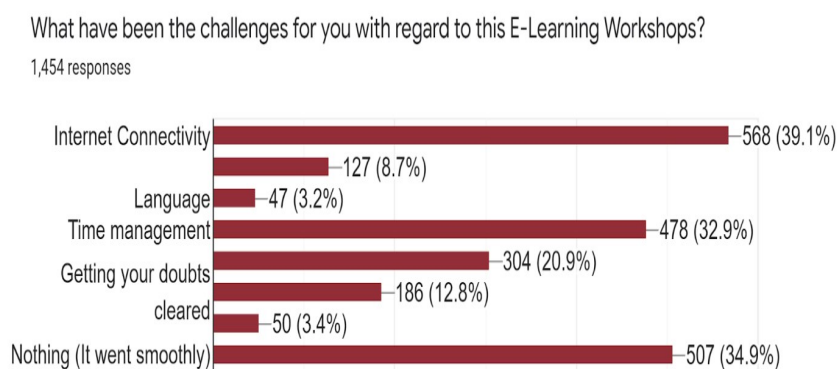
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[9] Educational infrastructure in developing countries cannot reap the benefit of online teaching methods emerging from the developed world. The news story being referred to can be read here: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/tripura-man-ends-life-after-failing-to-buy-smartphone-for-daughter-s-online-classes/story-DdXexxwrxS104pWmicMI1O.html

[10] Read more at: https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-student-commits-suicide-due-to-fathers-inability-to-buy-phone-heres-his-tragic-story-484666

Scroll.in by Protiva Kundu stated that "a nationwide survey of villages conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-'18, showed that 16% of India's households received one to eight hours of electricity daily, 33% received 9-12 hours, and only 47% received more than 12 hours a day"[11]. A global survey by the Pew Research Center in 2018 showed that out of the countries surveyed smartphone ownership was lowest in India, only 24% were reported to possess a smartphone.[12] Protiva Kundu's report also revealed that,

"In fact, only 8% of all households with members aged between five and 24 have both a computer and an internet connection. It is also useful to note that as per the National Sample Survey definition, a household with a device or internet facility does not necessarily imply that the connection and devices are owned by the household."

The survey for our study seems to reiterate the issue; Internet Connectivity emerged as the most noted challenge at 39.1% for the participants.

What have been the challenges for you with regard to this E-Learning Workshops?
1,454 responses

- Internet Connectivity — 568 (39.1%)
- 127 (8.7%)
- Language — 47 (3.2%)
- Time management — 478 (32.9%)
- Getting your doubts — 304 (20.9%)
- 186 (12.8%)
- cleared — 50 (3.4%)
- Nothing (It went smoothly) — 507 (34.9%)

Figure 3: Source: Author's Illustration.

Figure 3 shows As the three essential requirements namely, electricity, internet and device to access the internet, remain inaccessible to students, it must also be noted that for online teaching to take place the same infrastructure must be reliably accessible to the teachers as well, both at their homes and their educational institutions. To make online teaching-learning a valid mode of education, teachers must be trained and students familiarised with such tools. The pandemic pushed the Indian education system to an operating practice that either assumed or ignored the situation on the ground. Educational institutions cannot take on the role of the state and provide the infrastructure for online education and in the present circumstance, it appears that they may not have an alternative to online teaching in the absence of physical classroom teaching. Of the 1454 participants of our survey, a majority of 69.2% identified as living in an urban environment and only 30.8% identified as living in a rural area. Thus pointing to the notion that online education crystallises the economic divide in education.

Figure 4 shows It should also be noted that 48.43% of participants who identified as living in a Rural Area, preferred studying from the comfort of their home over the physical classroom compared to 46.1% of total participants
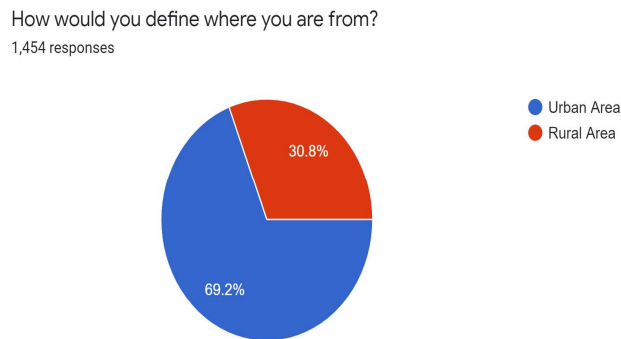
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[11] "Indian education can't go online – only 8% of homes with young members have computer with net link" by Protiva Kundu can be read here: https://scroll.in/article/960939/indian-education-cant-go-online-only-8-of-homes-with-school-children-have-computer-with-net-link
[12] The report referred to can be accessed at: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/05/smartphone-ownership-is-growing-rapidly-around-the-world-but-not-always-equally/
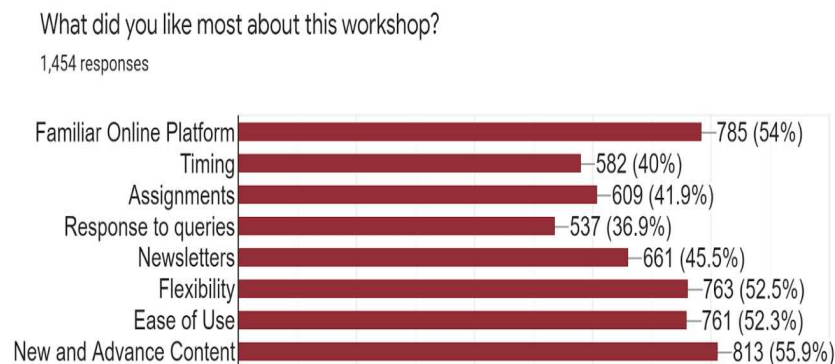
who opted for the same. And 34.15% of the participants who identified as living in a rural area opted for 'maybe' and only 17.41% of the same preferred the physical classroom over online E-learning programmes like the workshop. This data can be interpreted to note the awareness of a divide in the traditional physical classroom as well as the aspiration for the digital learning alternatives to live up the internet's egalitarian goals.

However, a point to note here is that the digital learning alternatives can (in line with Callard's vision of the internet bringing down "the wall of physical exclusivity") possibly distribute higher quality education if the point of origin can guarantee the quality, make the material available for free and accessible to all. This, however, as always presupposes the availability of electricity, internet, device to access the internet on and the necessary familiarity of tools being used (e.g. Apps, Operating System, etc.) One of the questions asked in the survey aimed to understand what the participants preferred most about the E-Learning Workshop. The survey revealed that "New and Advance Content" was part of 55.9% choices made.

Figure 5 shows Callard's second wall, the wall of "intellectual esotericism" built by dense styles of academic writing is charged with keeping the "public out of professional academic research". It must be noted that if the physical exclusivity of academia is not broken, it is bound to lead professional academic research down a blind alley. Disillusionment is not a trait unfamiliar to the Humanities. In a circumstance where such key issues cannot be addressed, it is fair to conclude that online pedagogy, especially in the humanities, will fail to meet its mark. \

How would you define where you are from?
1,454 responses

Urban Area
Rural Area

30.8%

69.2%

Figure 4: Source: Author's Illustration.

What did you like most about this workshop?
1,454 responses

Familiar Online Platform — 785 (54%)
Timing — 582 (40%)
Assignments — 609 (41.9%)
Response to queries — 537 (36.9%)
Newsletters — 661 (45.5%)
Flexibility — 763 (52.5%)
Ease of Use — 761 (52.3%)
New and Advance Content — 813 (55.9%)

Figure 5: Source: Author's Illustration.

The End of Student Culture: The Reimagining of Student-Centric Cultural Spaces

"Students will no longer live in the cities where their universities are located. Instead, they will listen to lectures closed up in their rooms and sometimes separated by hundreds of kilometres from those who were formerly their classmates. Small cities that were once prestigious university towns will see their communities of students, who frequently made up the liveliest part, disappear from their streets." (Agamben)

The classroom, the campus, the town, the student centres, the football field, the cafeteria, etc. are cultural spaces that have through the evolution of higher education remained the fabric that connects the formal tools of education like lectures, research, labs, etc. to their real-world evaluation and application. The role of student-centric cultural spaces in education is one of exchange and evolution, their importance remains equal to if not more than that of the formal tools of education. These cultural spaces are essential to the identity of students and institutions. Cultural spaces like hostels and dormitories provide informal education that remains absent from formal classrooms. Internships and jobs with local institutions show how spaces like college towns and campuses continuously evolve and expand the cultural domain of students. The cultural spaces associated with education have remained a point of social qualification and socio-political evolution[15]. The COVID -19 pandemic caused university campuses and cultural spaces to cease activity almost overnight. As educational institutions, today shift online, the desertion of these spaces and the resultant loss to students' cultural life remain unaddressed. Joseph E. Aoun notes that "a university of the future might offer three options: entirely residential, entirely online, or a hybrid of the two" (Joseph E. Aoun, More than Bricks and Mortar, chronicle.com). No matter which type of university becomes the norm in the days to come, we cannot shy away from the challenges of reimagining these cultural spaces. In the circumstance where we shift back to residential universities, infrastructural planning and upgrades must be considered. Social-distancing practices are the norm and even in the most optimistic outcome where we can completely overcome the pandemic, social distancing is going to leave its mark on planning and infrastructural upgrades. Sheila Liming, an Assistant Professor at the University of North Dakota notes that "students' and staff's interaction with their surrounding physical environs will grow more detached and casual as they come to see a campus not as the site of learning but, merely, as one of many possible sites" ("Town-Gown, Gone", chronicle.com). Urban Planners today are busy reimagining cities keeping in mind density and public health[16], educational institutions may need to consider the same. If however, our future lives in a screen, online spaces must be created such that they bring the identifiers of an institution into the student's digital domain. Such spaces need to preserve the freedom of the physical spaces they are replacing while providing safety against numerous digital crimes and misdemeanours. In such a situation the community as a whole must be reimagined online. A complete shift to a digital model will invariably result in the loss of established discipline, sports and athletics have already started moving away from the field to the computer with e-sports replacing annual meets and sports' day[17]. In Giorgio Agamben's view universities that will remain entirely online hold little water. He notes that "Students who truly love to study will have to refuse to enrol in universities transformed in this way, and as in the

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[15] Pearl K. Dowe writes about how physical space for Historically Black Colleges and Universities has provided an opportunity for communities to thrive. ("Place Matters", chronicle.com)

[16] Andre Brumfield and Carlos Cubillos's article "Cities and the Public Health: Our New Challenge in Urban Planning" elaborates more on this. The article can be read here: https://www.gensler.com/research-insight/blog/cities-and-public-health-our-new-challenge-in-urban-planning

[17] Nathan Kalaman-Lamb writes more about this in the article "Bad Sports-Colleges will covet the reliable revenue-and athlete's writes will be trampled", The Chronicle of Higher Education, chronicle.com.

beginning, constitute themselves in *universitates*[18], only within which, in the face of technological barbarism, the word of the past might remain alive and something like a new culture be born – if it will be born" (Agamben). Hybrid universities, in turn, have an opportunity to come up with creative solutions to the problems of both residential and online universities, but to expect that it could be put together like two pieces of the same puzzle may give rise to challenges of its own.

Grading/Marking Reform: Recalibrating the Focus on Learning

Although arguments about grading reform have existed for a long time, they have usually been considered advocacy for outlier ideas and have thus never found a serious audience. The pandemic has forced educators to consider the relevance of the special circumstance and today the notion of percentage and grade has boiled down to a simple pass or fail. Many educational institutions in India have suspended exams for all but terminal semesters. Giving student marks either based on their performance in the previous examinations or internal assessments and some cases, both. Such a situation presents an opportunity to reconsider the grading/marking system that has been carrying on for a long time. Phil Christman notes that

"We learn best when we're intrinsically motivated and deeply involved in a task; grades are distracting extrinsic factors that actually reduce student motivation. They are famously unreliable and, in their vagueness and subjectivity, they let implicit biases-racism, classism, sexism-run rampant. They do not improve performance, as well as descriptive feedback, does." (Christman)

The practice of marking or grading students has been considered essential and mandatory without emphasis on the efficiency it provides to its purpose. To examine what can be an alternative to this age-old tool of the traditional classroom, and how it fairs in the world of online and hybrid education, let us first address its originary goals. Grading is done primarily to validate the progress of classroom education. Percentage, grades or marks are used as a neutral parameter to form a comparative and informed judgement of the same. This very often leads to an environment that distracts students and even teachers from the goal of advancing knowledge and is liable to fall prey to externally assumptions and superfluously added value to the neutral parameter,e.g. the social value of scoring in the high nineties in a prominent challenge that students in India face. An alternative has emerged through the concept of "ungrading". In a seminar conducted by the Academic Center for Excellence In Research and Teaching in March 2019[19] two alternatives were discussed, one by Austin Bailey and another by Allen Strouse. Austin Bailey's method of ungrading relied on determining final marks based on two assessments by the students, one submitted in the middle of the semester and another at the end, that the students were to evaluate on their own. These assignments comprise of the students' assessment of their progress and the marks they expect based on that. In such a system the educator, i.e. Austin does not have the final word on the marks that the students receive. Austin does provide the students with rubrics for this self-evaluation they are to do which is structure into Evidence (20%), Formatting (10%), Logical Continuity (15%), Thesis/Argument (30%), Creativity (10%) and Effort (15%).[20] Such a system of ungrading provides complete transparency for the students in what is expected of them and where they are individually situated to achieve them.

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[18] Agamben here is referring to the Latinorigin of the word universities, which as he notes emerged from student associations in Europe.

[19] You can read more about it on: https://acert.hunter.cuny.edu/blog/ungrading-rethinking-assessment-in-the-classroom/2019/05/03/

[20] The rubrics are part of Bailey's presentation slides which can be accessed at
https://acert.hunter.cuny.edu/blog/ungrading-rethinking-assessment-in-the-classroom/2019/05/03/

Allen Strouse's design on the other hand comprised of the practice of "only assigning grades of A or B to written work. Instead of assigning lower grades, Allen offers students the chance to use his feedback to revise the paper, until they receive a higher grade. They can continue to resubmit their work until it is strong enough to receive a high grade." (Johnson) Methods of ungrading should be developed at the classroom level by the teacher keeping in mind the development of a system that encourages self-evaluation and avoids the formation of superfluous biases. Ungrading envisions the act of marking as giving marks and not taking them. Traditional grading conceives an ideal state of progress or answer which serves as a bias dissuading the teacher and the student from the task of educating in the individual circumstance. Such an approach encourages educators to employ a more descriptive language by which to determine the educational progress. A very interesting observation that emerged from the survey was that 50.3% of participants which comprise of students, teachers and scholars preferred self-evaluation over the traditional individual evaluation by instructors or the instant evaluation made available for multiple-choice type assignment by E-Quizzes (Illustrated in Figure 6).

Figure 6 shows as we transition towards an online-only or a hybrid system of education, the opportunity is ripe to reform the marking or grading systems which have remained central to the traditional educational system of physical classrooms. Teachers should be given the freedom to develop their own models of upgrading suited to the requirements of their disciplines and specific digital/hybrid classrooms.

Regarding assignments in online workshops and classrooms, what would you prefer?
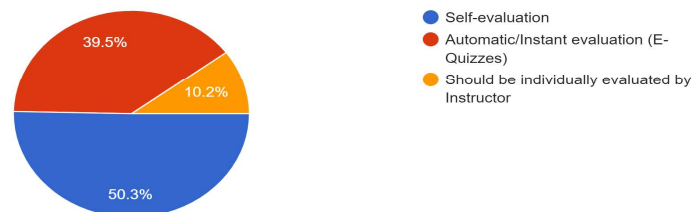1,454 responses

● Self-evaluation
● Automatic/Instant evaluation (E-Quizzes)
● Should be individually evaluated by Instructor

39.5%
10.2%
50.3%

Figure 6: Source: Author's Illustration.

SUGGESTIONS

With the possibility of a return to physical classrooms resting on scientific and administrative leaps situated in an indefinite future, it is fair to accept that the Internet will play a vital role in education for a long time. Any hope of the survivability of the educational system is contingent on the development of infrastructure to support a digital future for all forms of education. The following suggestions are based on the findings of the survey and analysis of issues involved in online education, discussed above.

Mode: Mixed Method i.e. E-Learning with the possibility of interaction for taking up queries is the most reliable option available for most educational institutions today and should be preferred. Real-time or limited-time accessibility is detrimental to the process as the infrastructural challenges involving the internet, device availability and period for familiarisation persist both for teachers and students. The challenges of LIVE classrooms are many and demand the highest quality infrastructure for all participants.

Size: With various online services offering free accounts that can hold up to 200 participants in a grouping, many

institutions would imagine expanding classrooms to such large sizes. However, small classrooms/groups preferably corresponding to the size of a physical classroom should be considered primarily because it is perceived that if the grouping of students remains the same as it was before the pandemic the social fabric of the class will help with the transformation to a digital classroom. While researching *A Framework For Evaluating Class Size in Online Education*, Susan H. Taft, Perkowski, and Lorene S. Martin, noted that "course enrolment can accommodate 30 or more students when they are simply absorbing and obtaining new information, 16-40 students when application of new knowledge is part of the course, and no more than 15 students when more complex learning that entails analysis and evaluation is included in the mix."[21]

Cultural Space

Students should be encouraged to form groups and interact on applications that provide ease of accessibility and reliable security features. These groups can be administered by the teachers but minimal interference should be observed to allow students to recreate their own cultural spaces. Creative activities should be encouraged in these groups to help students have better interpersonal communication and develop the informal agency of education. The viability of E-sports should also be entertained and encouraged through such groups. These groups will help students become a part of the discussion to better acclimatise to a digital transformation.

Applications

Institutions can initially incorporate popular and easily accessible applications to start conducting discussion classes, wherein the concerns and well-being of students is addressed. From such discussions and evaluation on the part of teachers and administrators, newer applications with facilities essential for the particular discipline should be incorporated. The survey found that YouTube, WhatsApp, Zoom and Google Meet were the four applications that students, teachers and scholars are most familiar with (Illustrated in Figure 7). Educational institutions should work with digital consultancy agencies to develop better and more reliable platforms that are suited both to teaching and non-teaching operations of an educational institution. It should be kept in mind that the disruption caused by the pandemic is not limited to the classroom, institutions should develop easy access online facilities for all official functions, ranging from admissions to query centres.

Teachers

Layoffs and major upheavals in the staff should be avoided at all cost. The attempt must be to recreate the environment of the physical classroom where discussions and learning can take place with fewest possible disruptions. Educational institutions must invest in training teachers in the new modes of conducting these classes. Since the shift to the online medium for most institutions has been sudden and alternatives have been found in a hurry, it is important to evaluate feedback from staff and students alike and preferably a joint panel of representatives from all concerned entities students, teachers, administrators should work towards a finding and refining a more permanent model suited to the particular circumstance.
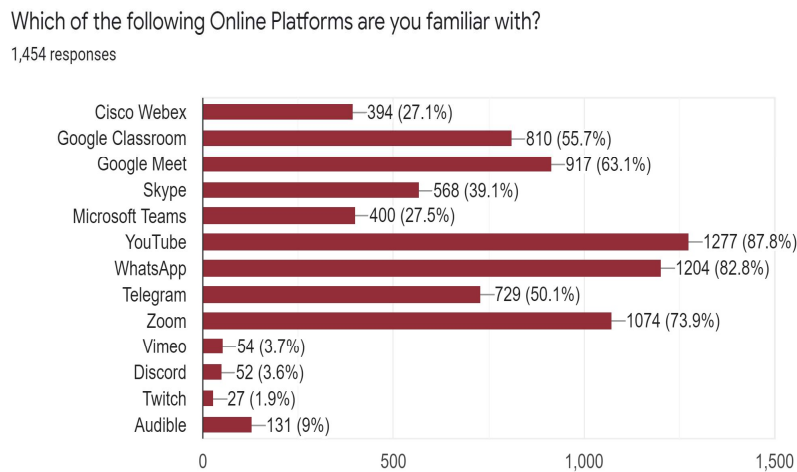
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[21] For more read Laura Sheiber's article on the same, titled "What's the Optimal Class Size for Online Education?" It can be found here: https://edlab.tc.columbia.edu/blog/14470-Whats-the-Optimal-Class-Size-for-Online-Education#:~:text=For%20any%20interactive%20constructivist%20educational,Bloom's%20taxonomy%20is%20more%20nuanced.

Disciplinary Reform

As opposed to STEM, the Humanities have for too long avoided situating themselves in the digital reality of the world around. It is time to update syllabi to include the progressive aspects of digital humanities. The learning of basic tools of digital and web design should be incorporated as compulsory aspects of all humanities' course and tools for digital research must be promoted across the board. Courses for newer subjects that envision the expansion of Humanities into their digital future must be developed. Creative assignments should range beyond simple PowerPoint presentations and dissertations to conceptual podcasts and docu-series.

Grading

Reform ingrading can be used to incentivise the new digital system that is to be incorporated into the education system. The transformation is ideal for developing alternative systems of grading/scoring suited to the class. As Figure 6 shows, self-evaluation is the preferred method of evaluation for students, scholars and teachers alike considered.

Which of the following Online Platforms are you familiar with?
1,454 responses

Platform	Value
Cisco Webex	394 (27.1%)
Google Classroom	810 (55.7%)
Google Meet	917 (63.1%)
Skype	568 (39.1%)
Microsoft Teams	400 (27.5%)
YouTube	1277 (87.8%)
WhatsApp	1204 (82.8%)
Telegram	729 (50.1%)
Zoom	1074 (73.9%)
Vimeo	54 (3.7%)
Discord	52 (3.6%)
Twitch	27 (1.9%)
Audible	131 (9%)

Figure 7: Source: Author's Illustration.

CONCLUSIONS

"Part of the technological barbarism that we are currently living through is the cancellation from life of any experience of the senses as well as the loss of the gaze, permanently imprisoned in a spectral screen."

Agamben, Requiem for the Students, medium.com

Agamben succinctly notes an essential challenge in any shift from the physical to the digital space. In the pedagogical evolution of the humanities, this remains of crucial concern. Critical inquiry is faced with the daunting task of continuing its investigation with newly forged tools, a more elaborate expression for its market-fate and the preservation of essence in the task of an almost complete revamping. Such a moment will be remembered in the future to come, where the efforts of those who managed to move forward with a steely determination into the digital world while keeping alight the fire of humanistic inquiry amidst harsh winds of change, will determine the future of humankind.

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