

Online education as a solution to pandemic: prospects and risks

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Abstract:

Online education is becoming more and more popular amongst students around the world. Although many people consider an online degree to be a lesser form of education. concluded that “on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction.” This study echoes the sentiments of many students, whether they various subjects – it is time to know pros and cons of online education before starting online education seriously

1. Introduction

Men have a peculiar plan of solving every problem. As lockdowns were imposed by different countries to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, education became one of the worst hit on social sectors. When the survival of mankind was at risk none cared for Millions of students being left unable to attend their schools, colleges and universities after restrictions on movement were put in place.

2. Need of the study

Many academic institutions chose to wait and see, but once it became clear that the impact of the coronavirus may be much longer than expected, teachers and education managers scrambled to address the problem. Within a short period of time, many found the best way to reach their students was by using information technology.

Reports have shown that most educational institutions are currently running online classes by using various platforms provided by social media, mobile phones and the internet.

Initially, WhatsApp became the easiest way for educators to connect with and teach their students. Teachers started sending assignments to students who were asked to complete them and consult with the teacher if they had any trouble. Some teachers were using Skype alongside WhatsApp, creating classes and bringing all their students together online for virtual lectures.

Meanwhile, others took to Facebook and Twitter to reach their pupils and gave them homework with deadlines for returning the work, which would then be checked and sent back with instructions. But more helpful has been Google Classroom, as it not only helps to create an online class, but teachers can also use it to teach and assign homework. The students can submit their completed works through the online tool and get feedback in real time from their teachers.

The most remarkable thing about all these platforms is that they are free both to institutions as well as students. This is a great help for schools which can save on electricity and utility bills, and other daily expenses which are often huge. Meanwhile, students and their parents save the cost of transportation and daily pocket money for the students.

However, some institutions chose to purchase special software from Microsoft, called MS Teams, which is more user friendly and can be customized to cater for particular environments. Its free version is also available, but offers limited options. Others have built their own software and created classes in order to impart education and keep students busy during the lockdown. However, the usual free platforms such as email, Skype and WhatsApp are enough in the majority of cases for educational purposes.

Various government have also been working on virtual education. Pakistan, for example, is launching a special education TV channel which will be dedicated to providing education up to higher secondary level. The radio is also being used across the country.

Other nations like South Korea have provided the latest gadgets such as tablets to students in order to help them navigate online education. In this way, online virtual education has been on the rise due to restrictions on the movement of people and the closure of schools.

COVID-19 may turn out to be a game-changer for the education sector, and especially for poorer nations with limited resources and an inability to construct traditional infrastructure for education. They can now embark on mass-level education programs by using free online resources.

However, there are also certain challenges to this rise in virtual education, the most important of which is affordability. Other key questions include addressing how many people can buy gadgets and access online resources. The issue of poverty is therefore a big hurdle for millions of people across the globe in accessing online education.

Another challenge is a lack of well-trained personnel. In less developed countries, teachers may not be tech-savvy enough to exploit the latest online materials and so they should be first trained in order to leverage this opportunity.

Governments and education authorities may also face problems as they are accustomed to the traditional system and convincing them to move to online platforms will be a daunting task.

The current trend of online teaching is a good start in addressing some of the most pressing problems for students in the short term, but fully utilizing it in the long term will require more coordinated and focused efforts.

We are living amidst what is potentially one of the greatest threats in our lifetime to global education, a gigantic educational crisis. As of March 28, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is causing more than 1.6 billion children and youth to be out of school in 161 countries. This is close to 80% of the world's enrolled students. We were already experiencing a global learning crisis, as many students were in school, but were not

learning the fundamental skills needed for life. The World Bank's "Learning Poverty" indicator – the % of children who cannot read and understand at age 10 – stood at 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries – before the outbreak started. This pandemic has the potential to worsen these outcomes even more if we do not act fast.

What should we be worried about in this phase of the crisis that might have an immediate impact on children and youth? (1) Losses in learning (2) Increased dropout rates (3) Children missing their most important meal of the day. Moreover, most countries have very unequal education systems, and these negative impacts will be felt disproportionately by poor children. When it rains, it pours for them.

3. Learning. Starting the school year late or interrupting it (depending on if they live in the southern or northern hemisphere) completely disrupts the lives of many children, their parents, and teachers. A lot can be done to at least reduce the impact through remote learning strategies. Richer countries are better prepared to move to online learning strategies, although with a lot of effort and challenges for teachers and parents. In middle-income and poorer countries, the situation is very mixed and if we do not act appropriately, the vast inequality of opportunities that exists – egregious and unacceptable to start with – will be amplified. Many children do not have a desk, books, internet connectivity, a laptop at home, or supportive parents. Others do. What we need to avoid – or minimize as much as possible – is for those differences in opportunities to expand and cause the crisis to have an even larger negative effect on poor children's learning.

Fortunately, we are seeing a lot of creativity in many countries. Rightly so, many ministries of education are worried that relying exclusively on online strategies will imply reaching only children from better-off families. The appropriate strategy in most countries is to use all possible delivery modes with the infrastructure that exists today. Use online tools to assure that lesson plans, videos, tutorials, and other resources are available for some students and probably, most teachers. But also, podcasts and other resources that require less data usage. Working with telecommunication companies to

apply zero-rate policies can also facilitate learning material to be downloaded on a smartphone, which more students are likely to have.

Radio and TV are also very powerful tools. The advantage we have today, is that through social networks, WhatsApp or SMS, ministries of education can communicate effectively with parents and teachers and provide guidelines, instructions and structure to the learning process, using content delivered by radio or TV. Remote learning is not only about online learning, but about mixed media learning, with the objective of reaching as many students as possible, today.

4. Staying engaged. Maintaining the engagement of children, particularly young secondary school students is critical. Dropout rates are still very high in many countries, and a long period of disengagement can result in a further increase. Going to school is not only about learning math and science, but also about social relationships and peer-to-peer interactions. It is about learning to be a citizen and developing social skills. That is why it is important to stay connected with the school by any means necessary. For all students, this is also a time to develop socio-emotional skills and learn more about how to contribute to society as a citizen. The role of parents and family, which has always been extremely important, is critical in that task. So, a lot of the help that ministries of education provide, working through mass media, should also go to parents. Radio, TV, SMS messages can all be used to provide tips and advice to them on how to better support their children.

5.Meals. In many parts of the world, school feeding programs provide children with their most nutritious meal of the day. They are essential for the cognitive development and well-being. These programs are complex logistical and administrative endeavors. It is not easy, but countries should find the way to provide those meals using the school buildings in an organized fashion, community buildings or networks, or, if needed, distribute directly to the families. If delivering meals or food is not feasible logistically, cash transfer programs should be expanded or implemented to compensate the parents. Planning is needed, but one has to be ready to flexibly adjust plans, as the

information we have about the likely paths of the pandemic change day by day, influenced by the uncertainty around which mitigation measures countries are taking. The process of reopening of schools might be gradual, as authorities will want to reduce agglomeration or the possibility of a second wave of the pandemic, which can affect some countries. In that uncertain context, it might be better to make decisions assuming a longer, rather than a shorter scenario. The good news is that many of the improvements, initiatives, and investments that school systems will have to make might have a positive long-lasting effect.

Some countries will be able to increase their teachers' digital skills. Radio and TV stations will recognize their key role in supporting national education goals – and hopefully, improve the quality of their programming understanding their immense social responsibility. Parents will be more involved in their children's education process, and ministries of education will have a much clearer understanding of the gaps and challenges (in connectivity, hardware, integration of digital tools in the curriculum, teacher's readiness) that exist in using technology effectively and act upon that. All of this can strengthen the future education system in a country.

The aim of all education systems is the same. It is to overcome the learning crisis we were already living and respond to the pandemic we are all facing. The challenge today is to reduce as much as possible the negative impact this pandemic will have on learning and schooling and build on this experience to get back on a path of faster improvement in learning. As education systems cope with this crisis, they must also be thinking of how they can recover stronger, with a renewed sense of responsibility of all actors and with a better understanding and sense of urgency of the need to close the gap in opportunities and assuring that all children have the same chances for a quality education.

6. Teaching Online: Challenges & Solutions

Despite increasing popularity of online education in many U.S. higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2014), educators are faced with challenges teaching online courses and such challenges can negatively influence students' experiences and

learning. In the chart below, I share a few common challenges related to online teaching and ideas to address such challenges, as outlined in a recent article (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiago, 2017). I hope your process of scanning this list will affirm what you are doing well and provide a new idea (or two) to try with your online courses.

7.Learners may have inappropriate expectations

Clearly communicate expectations, policies, and routines (e.g., describe a reasonable wait-time for feedback, estimated # hours learners can anticipate needing to spend on work each week, the role of the instructor versus student in an online setting, etc.)

Learners' readiness to participate in an online course varies

Clarify aspects of online-class readiness, including:

- Necessary **technical skills** that will be required (use computer, Internet, Google Drive, Word, Google Hangout, etc.),

8. Attitude with which you expect them to approach the course (“this may be challenging, but I can do it” attitude), and

- 9 **Time management skills** they will need to rely upon and develop (e.g., give tips to help them schedule blocks of time each week when they will complete online asks as if they were meeting for an in-person class; help them set up a Google calendar with alerts to keep track of due dates).

10.Learners may feel isolated and disconnected

Offer peer and/or group work· Connect with your students in different ways throughout the semester. Small-group discussions or office hours in a synchronous face-to-face formats

- Check in with students on a daily or weekly basis to help build community and keep students engaged in class.

Learners need to be actively engaged

Include a mix of media and multiple types of learning approaches, such as: · Audio (e.g., podcasts) · Videos (e.g., Teaching channel, TeacherTube, your own videos) ·

Discussions

- Various forms of text (e.g., articles, blogs) · Ongoing assessment in different ways (with clear assessment/rubric criteria) · Meaningful feedback · Reflection activities
- Collaboration with peers

11. One assignment description is often not enough; clarity of assignment instructions is necessary

While striving to very clearly relay assignment expectations and procedures in your syllabus and on Blackboard, send announcements before assignments are due to offer further clarification, or consider creating FAQs

12. The “bells and whistles” of technology tools do not necessarily provide the best outcome for student learning

Start by thinking about content and students’ needs first. What do your students need to know? Then, think about the best approaches to teach the content. Strive for meaningful use of technology and tools that promote student engagement.

Conclusion

A common criticism heard from educators of online courses is a lack of connection with students. “The instructor’s ability to communicate, form community, and deliver the appropriate lesson effectively makes all the difference in student learning outcomes”. Interacting with learners on a human level—by establishing a relationship with students, forming a classroom community, and connecting with them in various ways—can help them (and you) feel connected, *and* drive their engagement in class.

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