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Online Education in the Developing World in the Pandemic Era: The Paradox of Disruption¹

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Abstract

As the world is gripped by the devastating Pandemic with unabated ferocity, online education has become the order of the day disrupting and supplanting classroom teaching. While in common parlance Disruption has a negative and destructive connotation, theoretical literature on education posits it as Innovative disruption implying transforming the expensive, inaccessible Higher Education sector into one of affordability thereby creating a new market and value network disrupting the erstwhile market and value system. This process is one of negation of the negative to produce a Positive. However, inherent within this positive, is a greater negative because online education has perpetuated a deep Digital Divide and what appeared affordable and accessible at the outset, ultimately minimized the benefits for those segments of learners who were supposed to attain maximum benefit from the online system. Even so, the acceptance of the reality that online education has come to stay and not disappear, has superseded the initial recalcitrance. To consolidate its perpetuity, online education must go through a process of self-disruption implying the negation of the negative ingrained within itself. It must disrupt itself creatively and innovatively and provide a Constructively Deconstructive alternative to the prevailing system. The proposed policy brief seeks to explore the Dual Paradox of Disruption of Disruption and the search for Alternative within Alternative.

Keywords: Disruption; Digital Literacy; Pandemic; Deconstructive; Hobson's Choice; Symbiotic; Massification; Holocaust.

Introduction

When the deadly pandemic broke out upon the world like a holocaust, breath taking changes occurred in multifarious domains of life turning life itself topsy turvy. In the realm of education, online classes became the New Normal. It generated speculations in the academia whether Digital or Remote Learning would become perpetual in the days to come. Critics apprehended that the perpetuation of the system would perpetuate a deep-seated Digital Divide with constraints of affordability, accessibility, Digital Literacy, Infrastructure, Connectivity, etc. A renowned educationist warns that, the qualitative difference between technological and physical interaction would amount to a one-way flow entirely directed towards learners. The result would be homogenization of knowledge thereby hindering the creation of inquisitive critical citizens as Martha Nausbaum visualized and also indoctrination rather than enlightenment as Noam Chomsky put it. In India where 55,000 villages do

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not have mobile facility, this is sure to backfire (Das, 2020). Despite its numerous pitfalls, the message conveyed is loud and clear. Online Education is not a passing phenomenon. It has come to stay. It is not however an unheard-of innovation which has taken humanity aback. The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) gained wide currency in 2012 with its promise of delivering learning content online to any person and providing an affordable, flexible way of learning skills (Kaplan, Haulien, 2016, 441-50). However, its doubtful accessibility to those with low level of socio-economic background and the Differently abled, was an indisputable fact but since MOOC emerged as a supplementary and not indispensable alternative, therefore its legitimacy was not subjected to searching analysis but even so, it had emerged as a global trend. A decade ago, in Chinese universities, students communicated with their Professors either through e mail or not at all (Shi, 2012: 9-10). The cost-effectiveness of online education vis a vis the cost of Higher Education evoked acceptance from the academia particularly because the devices and software were user friendly and hence conducive to qualitative excellence. However, reality in a kaleidoscopic world, is not static but relentlessly dynamic. Today, in the era of Pandemic, the seminal question is, will online education replace conventional education? Policy makers will have to explore the answer in multifarious domains for the articulation of an appropriate policy blueprint.

Main Body of paper

Online Education emerged as a Disruptive Innovation signifying the transformation of expensive or highly sophisticated products or services to a broader population through cost-effective massification of learning and de-commercialization of knowledge through changing models of access. Disruption here meant undoing the erstwhile system which was expensive. It was not a major breakthrough but its cost-effectiveness accounted for its compelling attraction. Peter Stokes in 2011, was skeptical whether traditional classrooms would disappear in the face of this disruptive wave and also was not categorical in answering the question whether it would change the world of learning in a fundamental way (Stokes, 2011). Shortly before the Pandemic, Julia Fisher forecasted its revolutionary potential to equip learners with Social Capital (Fisher, 2020). Paradoxically, in developing countries, the very promise of accessibility accounting for the credibility and legitimacy of the disruption, is replaced by its very anti-thesis that is inaccessibility leading to a second cycle of disruption of disruption which corrodes its legitimacy. Thus, the legitimating disruption, now becomes the agent of its own de-legitimation.

The Second cycle of Disruption: Online Spectacle in India

India is the second largest online market after China with 560 million internet users. In 2019, the internet penetration in rural India was 290 million while in urban India it was 337 million. After the pandemic, India was confronted with the crude reality of Digital Divide signifying not only access to Internet but also pedagogy and population that was unconnected. Online learning was better known as Emergency Remote Learning but it largely bypassed the learners inhabiting the remote regions many of whom walked 1km to the highway to catch the connection because connectivity at home was almost nil. The All-India Forum to Save Public Education said in a Press Note that the online mode was neither effective nor inclusive. Attendance in the class conducted by teachers online has been below par. A big reason is that the penetration of high-speed internet with generous amounts of data is not uniform across the country. This Exclusionary mode would be least suited to the requirements of the student community of the country. There was also the heart-rending incident of Kerala where online class First Bell had started from June 1, 2020 in a channel named Victors where a talented Student of Mallapuram district who had no television or smartphone in her house, committed suicide out of frustration. Another similar case happened in Mansa district of Punjab where a class xi student committed suicide for the same reason. Her disconsolate father lamented his inability to buy his daughter a smartphone because of fund crunch (Saifulla, 2020). These examples should not be treated as exceptions rather than the rule because the lockdown following the pandemic, unleashed a wave of poverty which was more massive than the pandemic wave imperiling the existence of nearly 70% of the poor families. Not only did it widen the rural-urban divide but also in the tribal belts infested with dense forest, it was found that sometimes 2G data is available but more importantly barring a couple of families in the neighborhood, nobody has a smartphone. In many cases students cannot afford more than a couple of online classes as their internet package is limited. Here online learning has proved self-defeating and relapsed into a second cycle of self- disruption, this time a negative one.

The Psychological Divide

Whenever a path breaking innovation takes place, all stakeholders have to go through an inner revolution and adapt to the positive disruption abandoning their erstwhile values, perceptions, habits and actions. When adaptation and acceptance are lacking, anomic behavior to use the analogy of Emile Durkheim, becomes the order of the day. It grips both the teachers and the students with a sense of despondency and many of them are gripped by depression. Suicide, a phenomenon so elaborately articulated by Durkheim, is common among the students while teachers are overwhelmed by internal

disorganization and confronted by self-disruption syndrome recovery from which, is not very easy. This was very much in evidence in India where the level of Digital Literacy of many teachers was less than even the students. Digital Literacy created a Digital Divide between those teachers who were tech savvy and those who were not. Apart from inertia and indolence, there was also the problem of lack of experience in online teaching and the psychological divide created by online teaching where teachers do not know who their students are, cannot assess their body language and cannot provide personal attention to students to solve their difficulties. Consequently, online lectures become monotonous monologues without interaction and debate common in classroom teaching. Here, there is a different kind of access problem as students do not have direct access to their teachers and classmates and recognition can be at most through voice but not face. Online teaching thus seems to be conducted in a no man's land where teachers and students do not share any bond of mutual empathy. The joy of learning and teaching cannot be inhaled online.

How to Live with Online Learning: The Third Disruption

For all its limitations and dangers, online education is indispensable for the time being and co-existence with both pandemic and online learning is imperative. However, a third disruption is necessary to negate its Negativism and return to Positivism. The thrust of the education policy blueprint should be to accentuate the third disruption though online learning can at most be a utilitarian palliative rather than an alternative. However, it has to be accepted as a fortuitous alternative by the policy makers who must explore supplementary alternative expedients to make the alternative feasible. Here one might take a leaf out of the book of the countries of the Third World and Latin America.

In India, students in Kerala have started collecting discarded television sets from households for repair and distribution among needy students (Safiullah, 2020). In the same way, discarded smartphones can be refurbished and used for the benefit of those who cannot afford it. The alumni of universities can contribute substantially in this respect and Jadavpur University in West Bengal, has already raised Rs 5 lakhs. The University has embarked on a fund-raising drive for buying smartphones. Two female entrepreneurs in India have raised funds for buying digital devices. Entrepreneurs both male and female, can make a decisive contribution here. The e-pathsala the e-learning app of National Council for Educational Research and Training (N.C. E. R.T) is also a very good policy initiative.

In Afghanistan, the Directorate of Technical and Vocational Education, has developed the Alternative Education Scheme for persistence of Coronavirus based on Distance Learning with a combination of multimedia, print media. Video, focused on using local solutions to avoid dependencies. Broadcasting

video lessons through television, radio, websites, portals, social media, educational videos and making videos available through CDs form part of its grand design.

In Argentina, Educ.ar, the educational portal of the Ministry of Energy, has provided curated digital resources for teachers, administrators, students and families. Seguimos Educando began to broadcast educational content from April 1, 2020 with 14 hours of television content per day and 7 hours of video. For students without access to technology or connectivity, television and radio programming is supplemented with notebooks packed with learning resources delivered to homes and also self-learning resources, films, interviews, educational and communication proposals through video conferencing and tools. In El Salvador, parents are actively involved as self-learning guides and are given guidance through grades. The Cuban ministry for higher education has sought to link Higher Education Institutions with science, technology and innovation entities.

In Austria, psychological counselling is provided in 23 languages. This is particularly significant in view of the mental health issues triggered off by the stress and isolation of online learning. The government of Ghana has taken the initiative to ensure education anytime anywhere by revolutionizing teaching through Information Communication Technology (ICT) and its mission to transform Ghana into an ICT driven high income economy through education. This is significant because African countries rank in the bottom third in terms of internet affordability and availability making online education a distant prospect. (World Bank Edtech Team, 2020)

Today in the face of the unprecedented global shift towards remote learning, policy makers will have to take decisions in the face of uncertainty. Professional development for Digital Literacy, providing free wifi or subsidized internet facility to students, revamping infrastructural support, providing incentives to teachers and students to motivate them, reviving the radio particularly through Community Radio, which does not require Internet coverage, and which was slowly falling into desuetude, using solar power gadgets, blended mode of learning and integration of ICT with rural areas, are some of the policy recommendations that might mitigate the negative disruption of online learning. This third disruption will not be all-pervasive, but even partial disruption will negate and deconstruct much of its negative impact and provide a constructively deconstructive positive antidote to the malady.

Conclusions

It is now an accepted reality that online learning has come to stay though perhaps in hybrid mode. Like the second wave of the Pandemic with which the world is besieged today, and which is likely to be followed by a third tidal wave, corresponding waves of disruptive innovation must be unleashed

as part of the Challenge- Response Paradigm. The education policy must be formulated with the objective of minimizing the Digital Divide which is also true of the wealthiest countries. The policy makers should try to motivate teachers and students by conveying the message that while online education is the Hobson's Choice today yet one need not be totally subservient to it because on the one hand, teachers and learners will have to adapt to the New Normal but conversely, the New Normal too must be made feasible and practicable for the former thereby blunting the edge of its apprehended hegemony. The relation of the world of education with the New Normal must be symbiotic and not antagonistic. Einstein's precept that imagination is greater than knowledge can be the guiding force here as the challenge is to reimagine and reinvent education through the highest manifestation of human ingenuity which alone shall enjoy hegemony in a turbulent world.

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