

Classroom E-management and Assessment in the Digital World: Virtual Versus Traditional Classroom Teaching

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In this paper, I would begin by outlining the shift from the traditional to the virtual mode of classroom teaching with reference to English language and literature and hence, the requirement for online tools as a new pedagogy. Some of the e-tools will be discussed to highlight the vast potential of the digital world. However, the challenges will also be discussed to emphasize the fact that the virtual mode can never compensate for the physical mode of interaction involved in classroom teaching, especially with the students of English language and literature since the field requires different kinds of perceptions regarding different genres, which may not always find a digital substitute. Discussion will also revolve around the fact, that while teaching in a real classroom, the physical involvement of sight and sound becomes an effective medium for the teacher express herself (example in drama and poetry) and to gauge the level of students' understanding, while the virtual medium lacks this direct contact. Whether it is a novel, play or a poem, the expression of the teacher and voice modulation matters because it adds meaning to the written content. In the virtual mode, poor network connectivity becomes a major factor in creating a student-teacher communication gap. Finally, I will conclude by underlining the impact of the digital world on aspects of classroom teaching rather than just focussing on the techniques of teaching.

Traditional notion of classroom teaching reminds us of students sitting on chairs and desk and the teacher teaching while looking at them and explaining concepts with the help of black board or the white board. Apart from the sense of bonding (with the classmates and teachers) and the sense of belonging to a “class,” teaching and learning becomes a reciprocative process. Sadly, this sort of a personal interaction gets lost during the virtual mode of classroom teaching.

The new pedagogy of the digital world has many platforms to give the “classroom” feel with online portals such “Google Classroom” and “Microsoft Teams” (for attendance and maintaining records of assignments etc). The live lectures can be delivered through video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Meet (to name a few). However, the act of replicating can never replace the original or prove its authenticity through its functionality. There is something amiss here, that is the “human touch” and also the physicality and tangibility of the world around. For example, in Google Classroom, we “create” a class and give it an imaginary “room number.” The teacher and students come under the category of “People.” The students can join the class through a link or code shared by the teacher or the teacher can add them through their email addresses. These actions seem mechanical and can take place in seconds. The “feel” of human beings, namely, teachers and students, seem almost lost or maybe

superficially present. The virtual act of creating a classroom seems like adding faces/heads of students (sometimes even that is missing in their profile picture) where the individual entity is missing and their individuality is lost.

Teaching through video conferencing has its own challenges. For teachers, it is challenging since the students are not comfortable in switching on their cameras or unmuting themselves for interacting with the teacher, until and unless they are compelled to. This leads to a sense of exclusion, loneliness and even a feeling of isolation from the meager interaction of the “virtual class” since the teacher cannot “see” and gauge if the student is attentive, disinterested or “physically” absent from the class.

The feeling of alienation sets in if a teacher is teaching Shakespeare or any other dramatist, where the notion of audience (suggesting auditory senses) remains silent and invisible. The effort of the teacher in reading out the dialogues seems like a futile effort which lacks motivation since she cannot see the audience that is, her class. The possibility of making the students read the role of different characters is also problematic as the students might have poor connectivity and this may result in disturbance and lack of clarity. The same connectivity problem may be faced by teachers too. Moreover, the students may also be reluctant to switch on their camera, because of their informal attire at home.

It is also not a happy experience for the teacher, especially a lady teacher, since when she switches on the camera; she is anxious in trying to figure out whether the students are focusing on her lecture or her face, dress or the décor of her room at her background. Since she is a teacher of literature, she is more tuned to the nuances of critical analysis, feminism and theories related to objectification of women’s body (she might have even taught these aspects to her classes in the past). It is an interaction through the lens and the other side is mostly invisible (apart from still images and/or a few live ones). It reminds us of Laura Mulvey’s notion of “scopophilia” which describes the concept of “male gaze,” where the women’s body is objectified. Mulvey describes it with reference to movies and this situation may not be exactly the same but has the propensity of being appropriated as one. In this case, the lady teacher becomes conscious and it might hamper her teaching ability. She can turn off her video but then, the minimal level of visual interaction is lost, whereby some students may further lose interest in not seeing their teacher “physically” present in a “virtual class.” Moreover, since the students of UG courses are young adults and if they are boys, the notion of “visual pleasure” and “objectification,” may make her feel uncomfortable, even if the case may not be so. However, in an actual classroom, the teacher can take cognizance of the gaze of a majority of students and take action appropriately, even if it involves a simple scolding for diverting the attention in the right direction. At another level, the notion of interaction, communication and other forms of co-curricular physical participation among students is necessary for the “identity formation” of the students and it remains a limitation of the online method (Delahunty).

Among the other challenges faced by both, the teacher and the student, is the poor network connectivity, which might hamper the understanding capability of the student. Unlike the traditional style of classroom teaching, where the teacher can raise her voice (to be loud), if the student is unable to hear, in a virtual mode, the situation is out of one's control, due to poor connectivity. In this case, instant assessment of students' understanding becomes difficult although there are online tools which can be used after the concept/topic is taught, rather than simultaneously (the details will be discussed later). Erratic connectivity also hampers language teaching, since pronunciation, stress words and sentence formations become essential requirements for students to listen and learn at the same time as one speaks. The instant rectification of doubts becomes a challenge in case the student or teacher is unable to hear properly.

Now, I will highlight some of the teaching – learning e-tools that are seen as a part of the new pedagogy in enhancing the quality of teaching by making it more interactive despite the limitations of the virtual mode (as discussed above). In traditional classroom teaching, since the interaction is mainly face-to-face, it is called “synchronous” teaching as the student has to grasp the information within that period of time; this may also be for online lectures. However, some students may not be competent to grasp concepts quickly and the teacher may not have the time to divide her attention to all the students. In the virtual mode, there is another possibility, which is largely practiced, that is, “asynchronous” (also known as flipped mode of teaching) where the student is given some videos or notes to study at home and they can approach the teacher at their own pace of understanding. This approach becomes a bit more cumbersome in the traditional method due to restriction of time and space. In the online mode, the teacher can have “break-up rooms” for students and monitor their responses accordingly. She can also use quiz and polls through Google forms or Mentimeter Polls to check out the depth of knowledge of her students.

The quiz and polls can be used to question about the symbols in the poems or characters in the novels or as basic as dates of the authors. Giving multiple-choice questions for language related concepts is another option. The manually written answers can also be used for testing by setting word limits. The teacher can give her comments and remarks accordingly. The other option (through test settings) allows the students to check the marks instantly on submission of the test. It becomes easy for the teacher to give marks (without correcting them physically) and the grade sheet is automatically generated. This can also be shared among students to help them assess their own performance. Setting the timing and duration of tests, polls and quizzes, gives the teacher a better control over her students. The attentiveness and attendance record can also be measured in these ways.

Teachers can use other tools (technically termed as a part of LMS- Learning Management System) such as “Kahoot” and “Testmoz” for quiz (for testing language skills etc). “Padlet” is used for generating online debates among students (may be used for novels, drama or poem- for example the representation of slaves from the colonial and postcolonial perspective) and “Renderforest” for creating videos (for example- a poem can be decoded in a variety of ways to

make it interactive and that the students can relate the symbols and metaphors in a better manner). “Wakelet” is another platform which allows the import of PDF, URL links, tweets, videos etc, under a particular topic. It can easily be stored in the dashboard of the computer. The teachers can also set an example by using these tools and encouraging her students to make a group presentation through “Wakelet” or “Renderforest,” to test their creativity and knowledge. The teachers can also enhance their own skills by using certain virtual note-making skills such as “Insert Learning,” “Evernote” and “Prezi” as it allows the option of highlighting and adding explanations to the written text through sticky notes etc. Instead of reading out the notes, the teachers can display them. Creating “Mindmap” is another interesting method of highlighting the different aspects of a topic by drawing branches and other diagrams, which are inbuilt in the application. A good example of “Mindmap” can be seen in discussing the historical background/phases of feminist movements (relevant in Women’s Writing paper) or the developments in the age of Industrial Revolution (part of reading of Victorian Literature) and other background topics related to the texts.

However, the only disadvantage (of all the above platforms) is that, one has to open/link email accounts in all these websites to make use of the applications. The chances of website insecurity and the inability to verify the trustworthiness of all the websites increases the chances of hacking. Some extensions like chrome “meet attendance” (records students’ attendance in Meet lectures) are also said to be dangerous since it may lead to data leak. Extensions are also not compatible on phone, hence the limitation. Some of the above tools have their basic version as free and may be limited in some ways unless the upgraded version is purchased.

However, the major limitation of the online platforms is that in a developing country like India, where people come from various regions and economic backgrounds. The availability of the devices such as laptop, cell phone and other necessity such as server and data connectivity, may pose a big challenge in accessing and operating within the digital medium.

To conclude, my paper traces the distinction between the traditional and the modern (digital) mode of classroom teaching. The limitations of the virtual mode due to lack of physical student teacher interaction is underlined, especially in the English lectures where the teachers express their ideas through reading and even their performative skills (voice modulation, body language etc) which is helpful for the students in understanding poems and plays . However, the opportunities of the virtual mode, through the e-tools are also analysed.

For the young adolescents who enroll in UG/PG courses of English Literature, the literary world becomes their hope of getting glimpses of different periods of literature through novels, plays, poems, short stories etc. Limiting them to a virtual platform hampers their understanding since some of the aspects need a “human touch,” maybe an art of story- telling (through reading, expressing and explaining), which a teacher is able to do much better with her physical presence and interaction in a classroom. The language teaching has its own auditory limitations but the virtual medium tries to balance it through its various e-tools and testing measures.

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