Business education in India during Covid-19 times: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand the challenges faced by business education institutes while imparting education to the students in India due to Covid-19 and to provide solutions to such problems. This is a paper on business education practices in Covid-19 times. The paper provide solutions that have been applied in our institute to cope with the challenges posed by coronavirus pandemic. The challenges included network connectivity, classroom participation, assessment methods, and end semester examinations, among others. We developed solutions by interacting with peers and taking cues from online forums of bodies from our industry in India, like the Association of India Universities. The innovative solutions included snap quizzes, providing free internet to students, case study discussions, simulations, among others, through online platforms. Not all innovative solutions were successful, but majority of them proved useful in such times. The paper is unique as it is firsthand experience of the author in business educations field.
Keywords: Business education, management education, Covid-19, Coronavirus pandemic, challenges, solutions

Introduction and Background

It has been a thorny ride for most of the world, sailing against the tide of coronavirus pandemic. Around November 2019, the original COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan spread and infected some other parts of China. Wuhan Government took extraordinary measures to control the spread of this disease and locked the town on 23rd January 2020. Similar initiatives were taken in other parts of China to reduce the spread of disease. Within a few days, in several other countries, COVID-19 cases were found, and immediately, it was a global problem. A coronavirus pandemic was announced by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The virus spread to more than 188 nations and affected over 21 million population, killing over 750,000 people as of 14th August 2020 (Worldometers, 2020). The primary outbreaks areas are Europe, Iran, India, Brazil, the United States, and South Korea. On 13th March, the WHO announced the latest epicenter of the pandemic for Europe. But now, it has decreased in Europe. Now India, USA, Brazil and Russia are epicenters in the world.

Most countries have already have put limits on transportation (both within and outside) to deter the transmission of the disease in reaction to COVID-19. The government took numerous actions, which included social distancing, self-insulation; strengthen disease management health infrastructure; and request that people work from home. Several countries, including India, also reported that gyms, malls, movie theatres, ponds, and facilities also closed down to combat this unseen threat. Preliminary evidence shows that only the elderly is affected, and children are less

vulnerable. Doctors have confirmed no virus among children (Liu et al., 2020). In several nations, to prevent young and adults from this disease, it has led to the extensive closing of colleges, universities, schools (UNESCO, 2020). As of 14th August 2020, over 150 nations had collectively closed colleges and educational establishments, harming about 80 % student population in the world (UNESCO, 2020). Many nations have local school, and college closures and such closures were global in a matter of time.

A lot of literature is available on the closure of universities and schools, to reduce the spread of infectious disease in the community by breaking essential chains of transmission (Beech & Anseel, 2020; Chahrour et al., 2020). Also impact of corona virus pandemic on various sectors like education, finance (Roy, Pahurkar, & Kolte, 2020), manufacturing, etc. are available. Many universities and schools have suspended physical classroom teaching and other administrative functions. Universities have rapidly changed from face-to-face to online delivery for various courses and programs.

Digital Education appears to be a feasible option to fill the gap for schools and universities for the span of 10 to 12 months, thus raising the probability that student education may become compromised before classes resume. More importantly, the previous peripheral question of digital education in India was also brought to the forefront. In the future, the integration of digital education into a general education is likely. This should promote inclusive education across various geographies in India. This would also provide educators to create tailor-made learning strategies for each student (Gewin V, 2020). Digital learning offers other benefits, such as no physical presence in the classroom, the willingness of students to understand more through interaction and to study at a more cost-productive and comfortable pace. Digital learning is not, though, without its drawbacks and obstacles, since face-to-face contact is generally used in contrast to the fairly impersonalised aspect of remote learning as the strongest means of communication. Online education has been accessible globally. In the situation of India, we remain far from the mainstream of digital learning because urban students have the facility to opt for digital education. Still, rural students have no necessary infrastructure and do not have the resources to use digitally. Development of the Government of India's digital education infrastructure currently seems difficult because of a lack of budgets. Also, E-learning solutions and resources should be affordable to all the masses.

In fact, teachers need to be trained to utilise the modern technology, for imparting accurate and correct, unbroken, and seamless online education to students (Toquero, 2020). The continued availability of resources and all-round Internet access in Tier 1 cities, is not available in Tier 3 and Tier 2 cities in India. So they are mostly dependent on distance learning. E-learning is sometimes very patchy and impersonal activity. Students may be overwhelmed by game devices and home social networking but they do not have a sense of group feeling during online courses. Across all stages of schooling, modern technology cannot be implemented in the same way.

For individual companies that have built and improved learning management systems to be utilised by universities and schools, a tremendous opportunity would open up because they are efficient and accessible from any location. It tracks the entire progress of a student, right from the admission to the last day at the campus. It also provides faculty with tools for efficient and productive handling of student progress in terms of assessments, evaluations, and counselling (Chatti & Jarke, 2007). It can expand at a very rapid rate, so it would have to be priced fairly for use by educational institutions.

Business Education in times of COVID-19

Business education is also trying to adjust to the new normal of existing in times of Covid-19. Business education is more of interactions between students through case studies in classroom setting, analysing data, developing personality so as to prepare them for final placement and internship season. But the new normal has forced the students and faculty to work from home with the same enthusiasm and viguor that was possible while working from the office. The new normal has compelled faculty and non-teaching staff to adapt to more unique ways of communicating with the students. The newer tools to communicate were already there. Just that they were not used so earnestly as are used in times of coronavirus pandemic. Zoom, Webex was trying to convince people to buy and use their products to communicate and deliver lectures, training, etc. But few were genuinely interested. But as it is said, if a product is developed, it will find its customers. Zoom has never thought that its product will be so popular due to the corona pandemic. So to adapt to this new normal, faculty have changed the way they delivered lectures and training to students. Coronavirus has created fear and anxiety in the mind of the faculty. Such is the fear that nobody wanted to move out of their home. It was like invisible Dinosaurs were roaming on the streets, and people preferred to watch them from their balcony. Students were also very apprehensive about this pandemic (Meg Jay, 2020). They were also clueless about their future. They missed the college days, friends, canteens, movies, long drives, creative activities they do at college, etc. Lockdown has disrupted regular physical classes. They are now moved to online classes through various apps like Zoom, MS teams, Google meet, etc. Examination and assessment cycle has also been disrupted. Due to slowdown of internships and placements, universities and colleges in business education were faced with lower fees, which created barriers to the management of working capital. A further big issue is that it will impact the payment ability of a large number of students in the country in the private sector. Activities of student counseling are also affected. Some organisations will avoid the recruiting of skilled faculty for current positions, impacting efficiency, and excellence. Online retailing of SME's will also be affected by the corona pandemic (Mahajan, 2020; Mahajan, 2017).

All major entrance tests for management and business education are being postponed in India. This situation could be an alarming bell in most of the universities of the private sector. Faculty and workers have been met with pay cuts, while incentives and raises at most colleges have been deferred. So there is a risk that applicants do not seek scholarships, and if that happens, the need for foreign higher education does decrease in the long term, too. Employment is another big problem. Students who have graduated will be reluctant to exit jobs from the business sector in terms of the current circumstances. It is projected by Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) that unemployment will rise from 8.4% to 23% in early April 2020. Unemployment in metropolitan centers is 30.9% (Mahesh Vyas, 2020). In such situations, we cannot neglect the value of technology in the education sector, and the desire for new circumstances is the only option. Challenges faced by institutions/universities due to the coronavirus pandemic:

Moving from to Online Classes from face-to-face teaching

Most academics and learners around the world were optimistic about shifting into e-learning. The universities have already started with course planning to provide its students online learning. Virtual training is a new way of delivery for educational institutions. Most faculty are pursuing training for online delivery of lectures and use online learning platforms as an only delivery tool at this time. Though, some staff who aren't technical experts are hardly comfortable with this style. The online mode created concerns among the faculty, about its capability to cope with new technologies (Fathema, Shannon, & Ross, 2015). Business educational Institutions also do not

have sufficient resources or infrastructure to facilitate immediate teaching on online platforms. What about those students who don't have internet connectivity at home and on laptops? Could you teach online, realistic, and test classes, music, and art? What is going to do to the students who can't learn online? Quality online education is a key concern and needs to be addressed on priority.

Creating the same environment as in physical class

One of the greatest challenges is to create the same environment in an online class, like that of physical class. In the case of business education, students need to solve case studies, analyse particular business problem, discuss and debate on important happenings in business field. The physical class is a perfect platform to do such activities. Physical classroom has a lot of creative tools to engage students like management games, project work, group activities, which cannot be done in online settings. The holistic development of students is only possible if they also work in groups. Also, sports help students to rejuvenate themselves for the next day, which is also stopped due to coronavirus pandemic.

Assessment and Evaluation

Business education's assessment and evaluation is different from other education. In business education, more emphasise is on discussions, debate, situational analysis etc. So it is very difficult to do this in online setting. Face-to-face to online education transition has severe implications for evaluations and assessments. While technology was applied to support education and learning earlier, the assessment dimension was still underdeveloped. It is a difficult activity to submit online evaluations for those courses designed to be taught in person. The process of administration of unfinished assignments, initiatives, and other ongoing evaluations is unclear for both students and the faculty. Members of the faculty must adjust the form of assessment to fit online mode. It is difficult to track how students do so online to ensure that they will not cheat online. Laboratory studies, procedures, and assessments of results cannot be effectively carried out online. The loan taken by the students through government schemes (Mahajan, 2019) will be difficult to repay. The CSR activities of the education institutes will also be affected (Mahajan, 2018; Mahajan, 2015). Therefore, students who do not have proper internet facility required in the evaluation process, they would experience a significant disadvantage, which will affect their grading.

Mental and Physical Health

The outbreak of COVID-19 has disturbed many people worldwide. The exponential increase in Covid-19 cases throughout the world has generated a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. The university fraternity and the student are under stress due to this. This pressure can have unfavorable consequences for students ' education, physical and psychological health (Sahu, 2020). In addition to the concerns about their health, safety, education, international students who stay at their distance from home also have huge concerns about their families' wellbeing. Can universities take concrete steps to support students ' mental health? Coronavirus pandemic could significantly impact university graduates' careers this year. This can be late because the final examination is delayed.

Our University Response

Business education has moved from theoretical discourse to case studies to simulations over the last 100 years. It has been a thorny, yet successful ride for the universities and institutes imparting business education. Due to the corona pandemic, faculty have been imparting business education from home for the last four months using various platforms like Zoom, Google meet, Microsoft teams, etc. during this corona pandemic. I have never used these tools in the wildest of my dreams. But this pandemic has taught me to be digitally literate to stand in this new world. The most basic question a faculty asks when he/she enters the classroom and turns on his digital jungle, has

changed from Good morning students to 'Am I Audible?' and 'Am I Visible?'. Because he/she is not sure whether the digital system has started working correctly or not. As it is a new way of delivery, he/she is not sure about the audio and video aspects of the product he/she is using for lecture delivery. In India, there is a big problem with internet networks and bandwidth. Though the technology is 4G, due to low cost and competition, there are network issues in India (Danish Khan, 2019). And almost 50% of students come from rural India. But due to the pandemic, all institutes are closed. So all these students have gone to their rural native places. Because institutes, hotels, and hostels are closed due to pandemic by the local government. Students try to log in and attend sessions, but they always complain about network and connectivity. Another issue is the cost of the internet. Students are not ready to bear the cost of the internet. Also, most of the students do not have laptops or tablets. But in India, smartphone penetration is very high. So most of these students attend classes through mobiles, which have its limitation.

Faculty face several challenges while working through digital mode. The first problem they face is about students not interacting on these digital problems. Students are hesitant to interact on digital platforms. There are many reasons for this. Students, who for the most of their education life has been used to learning in classes, with their friends with them. But now they are alone. They don't have the physical and mental support of their classmates. Also, they do not turn on their videos. Majority of the students don't turn on their videos during lectures. So it is tough to track the facial expressions of the students. In physical class, it was easy to easily comprehend the mood of the students by just looking at them. A single glance towards students will tell you everything about their mood. How can we gauge the facial expression or feeling of students in online mode? Students will say yes or no or anything if they don't understand. But is it as effective as physical class observations? Also, when the class is of significant size like 40-50 students, it is near impossible to gauge the mood of students on an online platform. So engaging students in such an environment is a challenging task. When students are asked about this, they give a number of reasons like network connectivity, bandwidth issues (Danish Khan, 2019), laptop/ mobile charging problems, etc.

Most of them will just log in to mark attendance in the online class. To increase the participation of students in the virtual class, brainstorming session of all faculty were held to get inputs on engaging students. Faculty came with a number of suggestions to engage students virtually. The recommendations include a snap quiz, case study discussion, poster presentation, etc. Also, there was a suggestion to reduce the weightage of marks to assignments and increase marks weightage for online assessments like snap quiz, classroom participation, etc. These suggestions were accepted, and the online quiz, classroom participation, classroom assignments were given more weightage than offline tasks. In internal assessments, 70% of the total weightage was given for online classroom participation and online assessments like snap quizzes, case study discussions, etc. And only 30% to offline assessments. This method helped to increase classroom participation. Snap quiz has been practical to engage students as it gave immediate results, and students were happy and motivated to participate in the snap quiz. Case study discussion was not so useful because they were complaining of network problems, audio problems, etc. Students used to do poster preparation as a group activity in a physical class. In an online class, it was a challenge to do this activity. Students were given the freedom to ask questions during the class, so make it more interactive. Students used to type the questions in the chatbox. Immediate answers by the faculty increased student participation. During normal times, the physical attendance of students is a challenge, as they prefer to go to the canteen, movies, malls, etc. But now, during the corona pandemic, the problem has shifted from physical attendance to mental attendance. As students

have no option but to attend classes as there is no source of entertainment and also parents are at home. So they have no other choice.

After showing a video case study, students were keen to give their perspective on the video content. Teaching finance subjects was also a big challenge for the finance faculty because of numerical problems. In this case, we provided MOOCs and SWAYAM courses on fiancé subjects. Personality development assessments like group discussions were effectively conducted through online platforms as number of students are very less in group discussions. So it is possible to evaluate each student in group discussion. Personal interviews were also conducted through online platform.

Also, an innovative closed WhatsApp group was created, named as 'Always to help', to deliver everyday rehearsal questions to prepare students for the final exams. The WhatsApp group helps in daily practice of rehearsal questions and also permits as a platform for discussion of important issues. This WhatsApp group has been useful to interact with students for the faculty. We had a very focused approach as every faculty were allotted only ten students for counselling. The faculty will daily give one hour to this group to understand their problems and provide solutions. Thanks to our background in utilising these devices, we have adjusted rapidly to the current constraints. We have continued the use of our social network group to discuss daily questions with continuing the use of flipped classroom methods. Initially, we were undertaking all our sessions on Zoom, but after news of some security issues in Zoom erupted, we shifted to Microsoft Teams. The MS teams have been a very useful tool for planning, scheduling lectures, creating groups, taking assessments etc. Also, the feature of downloading the attendance list was very useful. MS teams also helped to take instant snap quizzes, group discussions, interviews, and other assessment tools smoothly.

Innovative Solutions

We have also established new approaches for using technology to extend these existing educational techniques in this era. We provide a flipped-classroom approach for different subjects such as consumer behaviour, strategic management, and so on. The students are provided instructional material as a pre-recorded video lecture that they can view during some free time before the session in this well-studied lecture process. The purpose of the session will be to synthesise, apply, and discuss case studies. Therefore, students enjoy this approach. This approach often allows trainees to view a library of video lectures online at any time. This will reduce the number of participants in the classroom online and allow more contact at the correct level between participants. MS teams helped to record each session. So students who could not attend had a chance to watch this video lectures on One drive of Microsoft. Students were given assess to One drive of the institute.

A variety of constraints on this platform are there, such as faculty struggling with modern technology skills, students with low connectivity and requirement of high bandwidth for such platforms. But the university staff with experience with these methods can solve these obstacles by investing time and resources. Virtual learning is a effective method for education during class time, but the problem of practical sessions is always there. So in such situations, case studies using simulations is beneficial. We have been using simulation case studies for our students for a long time now. It was very useful in online teaching. If simulation case studies are not available, viewing of high-quality videos of MOOCs and SWAYAM (Swayam, 2020) platforms is recommended to support in case of significant loss of learning in online mode. We provided specific links of subjects and topics to the students on MOOCS and SWAYAM platforms.

We conducted assessments using Microsoft teams (Microsoft, 2020). We developed a combination of descriptive as well as objective questions based evaluation pattern. Previously, in a physical environment, all the questions where descriptive. More space was given to answer descriptive type

questions so that students write a comprehensive answer to these questions on the MS teams platform. We had 50% multiple choice type questions and 50% descriptive type questions. It was well-received by students. But there were also problems for some students like connectivity, not able to complete the test, connecting with other students while attempting the exam, etc. So we had to arrange re-exams for such students. Though we have been successful to follow above practices, it is also necessary to understand the expectation-performance gap (Bui & Porter, 2010) towards online education among the students. This will help to make essential changes in the online delivery of education to the students.

After Coronavirus pandemic

Before countries may decide whether the trade-off between economic growth and public safety would require them to relax the constraints on daily life, uncertainty over the scope and length of the COVID-19 period should remain in each jurisdiction. Adjusting to normality won't be an easy one-time adjustment to existence like it used to be. Jurisdictions will determine threats accordingly, and both must take precautionary action against COVID-19 outbreaks on the second and third waves. Open schools – like National Institute of Open Schooling in India, most of which continue to operate through the COVID-19 pandemic – and open universities –UK Open University; Athabasca University, Canada etc. will offer a range of classes, and flexible learning place and time to support scholars to catch up with the syllabus. While institutes that usually teach in a physical classroom, in school or campuses, will possibly return with some relief to that form of education, the particular arrangements made at the time of coronavirus pandemic will have a lasting impact. The structures that all organisations have put in place to carry out their educational and training tasks in a time of crisis will benefit in the long run. The learnings we had from this crisis, in terms of online education should be embraced for the future of education.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the basic structure of business education all over the world. This paper puts forth the challenges faced by business education institutes while imparting education to our students. We tried to provide solutions that have been applied in our institute to cope with the challenges posed by coronavirus pandemic. The challenges included network connectivity, classroom participation, assessment methods, and end semester examinations, among others. We developed solutions by interacting with peers and taking cues from online forums of bodies from our industry in India, like the Association of India Universities. Our faculty also chipped in to provide innovate solutions to face these challenges. The innovative solutions included snap quizzes, providing free internet to students, case study discussions, simulations, etc. In all, it has been a rough ride for faculty and students to adjust to this new normal but has been fairly effective in helping to survive and thrive in such pandemics. But students are surely missing the physical environment of the classroom, the canteens, the sports grounds, the creative festivals on campuses. Because colleges, universities provide a conducive platform for students to hone their skills, to interact with their friends and peers, to open up to new possibilities in life. I think this coronavirus is nothing but the excess committed by human beings against nature. I hope nature will soon allow us to return to our regular life. We can hope for a better tomorrow where students are back on campuses and learn most effectively. But blended learning is the future as students will look to gain knowledge from both physical and online education (López-Pérez, Pérez-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011). The present paper has its limitations. This paper is based on actual experience of the author as a business education faculty. So biased view towards the business education cannot be ruled out.

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