

Chapter 13

Framework to Navigate the Virtual Classroom Space

Salome Divya Joseph

SRM University, India

Sasikala S.

University of Madras, India

Antony Vinoth Kumar

University of Madras, India

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the need to develop sustainable and contextual teaching-learning processes with the paradigm shift in pedagogy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Descriptive factors associated with preference for mode of learning was determined through a survey among 169 teachers and 388 students from engineering, humanities, and science backgrounds in South India. Thereafter, a qualitative study was carried out on selected survey respondents. The main research questions raised were: What are the expectations of teachers while teaching online? What are the expectations of students while learning online? What are the outcomes of online teaching-learning (teachers' and students' perspectives)? How can online teaching-learning be improved? Qualitative inquiry, through questionnaires and interview, was carried out among 15 teachers and 17 students. Thematic analysis was carried out. The findings gave rise to the formulation of a framework to navigate the virtual classroom space.

INTRODUCTION

Although online courses have made their way through into education over the past decade (Kim & Bonk, 2006), the onset of the pandemic across the globe has hastily launched the new era of virtual education. This change, although welcome by the education system, causes concern for all its stakeholders due to the various issues it brings along in a developing country like India (Sudevan, 2020). At the systemic level, it poses a threat to increase the divide between the haves and the have nots. At more local levels,

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it has required accelerated learning and adjustment on the part of educational institutions, teachers, and students. The perspective of teacher-student interaction has changed in the current scenario, where students are encouraged to use their gadgets to attend the classes, which was almost entirely forbidden in the classroom before. The paradigm shift from physical classrooms to virtual education has resulted in mixed perspectives from different stakeholders. Some learners have the tendency to focus on positive feelings despite the presence of negative feelings (Zembylas et al., 2008).

India being a developing country, has its unique challenges. The poor accessibility and availability of gadgets itself is a fundamental problem to be addressed. According to the Sharma (2020), only 24% of Indian households have access to good internet connection for e-education. In addition to this, the network facilities and the affordability make access to e-learning extremely difficult. Moreover, many government-run institutions are struggling to manage with the infrastructure available to them due to lack of funds and resources. Bearing these factors in mind, this research focuses on those teachers and students from private universities who have access and are actively engaged in online education.

Virtual learning, however, has certain undeniable advantages. Time, effort, energy, etc. are preserved, which can be productively used in enhancing knowledge and skills of students. Online education is going to be a part of the teaching-learning process in the near future. If not completely, at least partially, or as blended teaching pedagogy. As Kim and Bonk (2006, p.29) stated, we are “entering a unique and exciting era in online teaching and learning. And perhaps the perfect e-storm is becoming less cloudy and ominous”. According to Twigg (2001) many problems automatically arise from online education, relating to quality assurance standards and what constitutes learning quality. Online learning has become popular due to the flexibility, utility, and accessibility of usage. E-learning aims to increase the ease of use of learning experiences for learners who cannot attend the regular physical classes, collecting and distributing the content in a cost-efficient manner and helping or enhancing the strength of the students who are participating in e-learning classes (Jethro et al., 2012). Dede (2006) recommended distributed learning which refer to orchestrated mixtures of face-to-face and virtual interactions.

According to Garrison et al. (1999), in their theory of community of inquiry, effective educational experiences are embedded between the teachers and students. The theory states that the three elements essential for effective learning include (a) cognitive presence, (b) social presence, and (c) teaching presence (Garrison et al., 1999). Cognitive presence is considered central to learning experiences, which are essential for thinking and learning at higher levels of education. Social presence is the second core element which acts as a supplement for cognitive presence by emphasizing the ability of the students to project their personal characteristics onto the community. The third element is the teaching experience which focuses on integration of social and cognitive presence; this can foster creativity, integration and facilitation. Therefore, in and through the paradigm shift of the education system, one should focus on these elements to effectively reach the goal of optimal learning.

Drawing from the reviews and theory on the different modalities of learning, it is vital to understand the expectations of teachers and students from the online teaching-learning process as well as explore the challenges and benefits of education through the online mode. While some research points to the urgent need for a radical shift of pedagogy towards an individualized, small group orientated, multi-dimensional model of teaching (Sun, 2011), other research focuses on identifying strategies for maintaining online instructional quality, as perceived by both faculty and student respondents, include maintaining open communication with students, ensuring that online courses are as rigorous as their traditional counterparts, using a variety of instructional methods to appeal to students' varied learning styles, requiring students to interact with the instructor and with each other to foster group cohesiveness, and using group work

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