ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN INDIA

PRESENT AND BEYOND

Foreword by

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Digitalization in Education and Its Negative Consequences: An Evaluation from an Indian Perspective

Samit Kumar Maiti

Introduction

The twenty-first century may be described as the era of technology and the digital revolution, with technology affecting each and every domain of human life. Digital technology has become the dominant terminology in contemporary discourse. The terms such as 'digital culture', 'digital community', 'digital politics', 'digital humanism', 'digital literacy', 'digital devices' have acquired global currency and are an integral part of our everyday discourse. Digital technology has permeated practically into every section of human life and it has come to introduce a new paradigm in teaching-learning practice in higher education. Today, higher educational institutes use digital technologies for multiple purposes: information retrieval from diverse resources; multi-media presentations; communications; examinations: class administration etc. Unquestionably, digitalization of education has numerous benefits, but, at the same time, it must be acknowledged that it has its several negative consequences on the learners, teachers, academicians, society, and culture. The paper proposes to make an assessment of the negative consequences of digitalization of education.

Digitalization in Education: Positive Aspects

E-learning, which has now acquired global popularity, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, has several positive aspects which have been outlined by Ana-Maria Gabriela PETRAȘUC in the article "The Dark Side of Digitalization: Information and Communication Technology Influence on Human Learning Processes" (2019).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Ana-Maria Gabriela PETRAŞUC states, has the following benefits:

Acquiring knowledge and skills: ICT helps individuals to access information; helps in developing study/reading habits; facilitates academic success by offering easy access to information; helps to improve managerial and professional qualifications; functions as the motivation booster for the learners as they learn many things independently and in a very short period;

Increased social skills: ICT offers an opportunity for the learners to interact and communicate with the peers, resource persons and academicians;

Access to information anytime and anywhere: with the widespread availability of the internet and smart devices, learners can access information anytime and anywhere. This increases their autonomy and transforms educators into facilitators;

Promoting lifelong learning: the widespread popularity and availability of online courses had enabled people to adopt education as a lifelong process;

Access to broader areas of knowledge: along with the traditional academic subjects, online education system has opened up new avenues of learning and knowledge to fulfill the diverse interests of the learners.

Apart from the above benefits mentioned by Gabriela PETRAŞUC, there are also numerous positive outcomes of digitalization in education. It has opened up an unprecedented opportunity for exchange of ideas, knowledge and skills, and widened the scope for interaction with the global academic community. Virtual world has conveniently diminished the geo-spatial limitations. Digitalization of resources is truly democratic in nature as it is easily accessible by all the stakeholders. Virtual world has created new routes of creativity and generated new avenues of knowledge, and created new job opportunities for learners.

Digitalization of Education: Negative Aspects

Despite the above benefits, it can hardly be claimed that digitalization of education is an unmixed blessings. Following is an analysis of the negative consequences of digitalization of education in the Indian context, along with the recommendations to overcome or to minimize the harmful effects of digitalization of education.

Academic Capitalism

Theories of academic capitalism have focused on the ways how the universities have increasingly become entrepreneurial in nature and have adopted commercial approaches to education. Moving away from their traditional objective to offer quality education for the holistic development of the students, most of the universities, particularly the private universities, are now keen to offer many online courses which will provide them the opportunities to create new sources of revenue. The universities which are now governed by their purely capitalistic motives are in a competitive rush to open up new study centers across the globe, and have come to treat students as the consumers. Founded by the capitalists, the private universities, are now turned into new centers of academic capitalism and the academic courses are designed in conformity with market logic. The expansionist nature of the universities suggests that they are governed by the post-industrialist popular demand for the right to universal access to the product. The motto of quality of education has been replaced by the quantity of education. Interestingly, the idea of 'quality' has undergone a change with the growth of capitalistic ideology in the modern society. The remark made by Davies (1991) is absolutely right when he says that quality is "whatever the prevailing cultural and economic hegemony defines it to be." Commercialization of education or commodification of education is one of the most damaging effects of digitization of education.

Digital Divide

The term 'digital divide', which has received a considerable media attention, refers to inequities of access to technology on the basis of such factors as income, education, caste, race, and ethnicity. Digital technology has foregrounded the gap between the developing and developed countries, and between the rich and the poor. Technology is a powerful tool to eliminate differences between class, caste, gender, religion, geography, etc., and, for that, what is needed is the opportunity to access the digital resources. But, in India, the huge economic discrepancy between the rich and the poor is the major obstacle on the way to optimum utilisation of the benefits of digitalization. While the children with their strong financial background enjoy the multiple benefits of online education, the children with their weak financial background struggle for basic rights for education and health.

Loss of Academic Autonomy for a Teacher

In a classroom, a teacher is solely responsible for the development of entire study materials and delivery process, hence he enjoys academic freedom and autonomy which gives him satisfaction of performing his teaching job, which is supposed to be a sacred job for many teachers. But in comprehensive online teaching frameworks, a teacher is to adopt a new role as he is to work in a team with editors, producers, graphic production personal, instructional designers, computer experts, professionals, etc. His role is like an editor or a collaborator in a team framework. As the online courses are designed for a large number of students, the mechanism of online courses follow the principles of mass production, standardization, objectification and centralisation. The courses are also planned and distributed among teachers with a rigid timeframe. To a great extent, distribution of teaching responsibility among the academicians follows the principle of strict division of labour among the professionals in the theory of industrialisation. Researchers like Sarah Guri-Rosenblit think that "Such working conditions differ immensely from the sole and overall responsibility of professors of their courses which has characterized the academic teaching for over 900 years. Professors who view the academic freedom in teaching as a sacred value of their profession, resist strongly the unbundling of their teaching responsibility and the participation in a team framework" (2009). Such a working condition is contrary to the long-standing academic culture in higher education institutions and it significantly reduces the academic autonomy of the academicians.

Online Teaching: A Time Consuming Affair

Compared to face-to-face classroom presentation, online teaching is time consuming as a teacher needs to devote more time to designing the presentation and preparing the study materials. Studies have shown that not only teachers but also students sometimes feel that online courses increased significantly their study time and workload (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009).

Challenging Responsibilities of the Teachers

Teaching through digital medium demands a lot of challenging responsibilities from the teachers. A teacher is expected to play many roles while utilizing digital technologies for the purpose of online teaching. For instance, a teacher is expected to provide infrastructure

for learning such as syllabus, communication tools, class routine, and instructional resources before the commencement of the class. He also must provide guidelines for effective participation, collaboration, and learning strategies. Apart from monitoring and assessing learning, the online education system also demands that a teacher must provide feedback, remediation, and grades. It is also the duty of a teacher to resolve instructional, interpersonal, and technical problems that may arise during online classes. Finally, it is the sole responsibility of an instructor to create a favourable learning atmosphere in which the learners will feel safe and connected for the success of the teaching-learning process through the digital medium.

Burnout

There is a growing consensus among academicians that long-time involvement in teaching-learning activity through digital technologies is an added source of stress and burnout. Burnout is defined by Guri-Rosenblit, "as both a psychological and physical response to workplace stress" (2009). Fatigue, poor self-esteem, and inability to concentrate on any particular subject are some of the symptoms of burnout. Maslach and Leiter (1997) have identified six major contributing factors to burnout: (1) workload; (2) inability to fix and follow day-to-day priorities; (3) dissatisfaction for insufficient reward; (4) development of the sense of isolation in a community in which relationships become impersonal; (5) absence of fairness where there is no trust, openness, and respect; and (6) development of conflicting values. Burnout symptoms are not visible only among the instructors but the learners who are exposed to digital technologies for a sustained period may also develop such symptoms. So burnout symptoms, which eventually may lead to isolation, disillusionment and exasperation, are one of the most pernicious effects of digital technologies on the academics employed in higher education.

Sense of Isolation

Education through digital platform is an isolated affair and it demands specialised skills. For this very reason, many teachers teaching online from afar develop an isolating experience as they are not emotionally connected to the students. The students also experience similar sense of isolation as they are to learn in a detached manner, without any meaningful communication and interaction with the peers. Compared

to online learning, face-to-face learning in a physical classroom offers a more satisfying experience.

Adverse Effects on Socialization

One of the fundamental assumptions behind the rapid spread of online education was the notion that it will enable the learners to pursue their learning without attending the physical classrooms in campus. Online education was viewed by many as a solution to the constraints of time and space. It was also predicted that the proliferation of online education will eliminate the geographic hegemony of higher educational institutes in the distant future (Beaudoin, 2006). Alvin Toffler (1980) who popularized the term "electronic cottage" in his book *The Third Wave*, went to the extent of predicting that the future society will turn into an electronic version of the cottage industry when the actual home will turn into the digital world of virtual reality. In reality, such predictions have not been materialized. The fact is most students, particularly college-going young learners, prefer to attend physical campus, lecture halls, and meet with their peers, even if they are provided with videotaped lectures, high-quality study materials, and exercises. The essential objective of education is not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also learning the skills of socialization. According to Aristotle, man is a social animal, and the "need of humans to socialize is essential..." (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). A physical classroom provides the learners the opportunities for lively interactions and meaningful exchange of ideas and experiences. Socialization of learners is as important as the acquisition of knowledge and skills. But, one of the major drawbacks of virtual learning is that it rarely offers the learners the opportunities for socialization. The virtual classroom can never be a true alternative to the physical classroom, which offers opportunities for real interactions with peers and lively communication with friends, without which it becomes really challenging for the learners to maintain healthy mental and physical states.

Interaction is not Knowledge Construction

The internet offers various effective mediums of communication and interactions with academic and resource persons which are supposed to help the learners to construct their meanings, clarify their concepts, and gain knowledge in a subject. But the researchers are sceptical about the effectiveness of such interactions through

online platforms in developing new concepts (Bates, 2005). Bates rather argues that online programs do not automatically ensure a learner's development of knowledge in any subject, what is needed is an epistemological understanding of a particular domain. Even well-designed online programs do not automatically lead to learner's knowledge construction in any subject. It follows therefore that intervention of expert teachers is crucially important in the construction of knowledge, and the teacher's role is significant particularly in teaching young learners, both in the classroom and online mode of teaching. Interaction, it is true, is crucial for the construction of knowledge. But, for that, interaction must be a meaningful interaction. A meaningful interaction must function as a catalyst to stimulate learner's intellectual curiosity and motivate him to creative and productive engagement. This holds true for both online and classroom-based modes of learning.

Internet: Not always a Facilitator but sometimes a Distractor

It is commonly assumed that students of this generation are substantially and qualitatively different from the students of the past generations. The students of this generation are more technologically savvy, they use their education for different purposes, and they have different expectations of their lives. New generation learners grow up with technology and acquire their learning through computer screens, different apps, and digital platforms. Traditional methods of teaching with books, lectures, blackboards, and other TLMs seem to have lost their effectiveness. It is true that learners of this generation are more equipped with technology because they are born in the era of information technology and the digital revolution. But this does not necessarily mean that students today use digital technology extensively for academic purposes. Digital technology has its huge application in entertainment: music, videos, video games, etc. While digital technology could have been used as an effective tool of education, it is commonly found that young learners are more addicted to entertainments than they use technology for academic purposes. Mere mastery over digital technology does not make a learner necessarily a knowledgeable and skilled person. For this very reason, digital technology does not always function as a facilitator to learning, but sometimes it turns into a tool of distraction.

Virtual Learning: Superficial and Ephemeral

Online reading is supposed to be very superficial kind of reading, as there are multiple ways of distraction: an individual's concentration is easily disturbed by an email notification, or an advertisement, etc. A reader on the online platform can hardly concentrate on an article long time. Frequent disturbances and quick transitions from one subject to another, are obstacles to rigorous thinking and creative productivity. Online reading experience rarely leaves a lasting impression on mind and is detrimental to the human cognitive process. Hence the learners learning through online mediums rarely develop reflection ability, critical thinking, and imaginative power. Knowledge acquired through online medium is superficial, ephemeral, and is not conducive to the holistic development of a learner's personality.

Virtual Learning: Detrimental to Cognitive Process

In a classroom interaction between a teacher and a student, not only the words but also physical gestures, body language, etc. are transferred, which cannot be communicated through technological means. "Therefore, the resonance of physical communication in the human brain is usually much deeper than reading a printed source or writing an answer" (Gabriela PETRAȘUC, 2019).

Internet Addiction

One of the major problems of digitalization is addiction. Ana-Maria Gabriela PETRAȘUC argues: "Individuals are tempted to use the Internet and smart devices in an unlimited way, not just for information and learning. People become addicted to the Internet when they completely separate themselves from their real life. Today, this phenomenon is very common especially among young people. Many Internet users are changing their lifestyle drastically just to spend more time online and this starts to be very frightening" (2019). Digital technology introduces young learners to the most pleasurable elements of young people's social worlds. The young learners are very sensitive, immature, and emotional. Without understanding the deeper mechanism of social functions, the young learners are attracted by the superficial elements of the society and they develop a faulty perception of society. Mastery over digital technologies give them an autonomy and a taste of freedom at an

early age. They develop an obsession with digital technologies which give them a comparatively easy way to explore their creative potentials.

Risky Exposure to Harmful Contents and Sites

ICT-based education exposes young learners to highly vulnerable contents, websites, online platforms, and social groups. There is a possibility that learners may join a wrong social group, which might cause psychological and emotional disturbances, or in extreme cases, they may develop criminal tendencies. As the negative impacts of excessive internet use, learners may develop aggressive behaviour and a faulty moral attitude. There are many contents on the websites which are harmful for the young learners, particularly the pornographic materials. It is not unusual that they may develop an addiction for those sites, with the disturbances to their learning.

Cyberbullying

With the rapid expansion of technology, internet-users are growingly experiencing the phenomenon which is commonly known as "cyberbullying" or cyber harassment. Cyberbullying occurs when someone, usually a teenager, bullies or harasses others on the social sites or on the internet. Posting scandalous remarks, rumours, threats, sexual remarks, hate speech, etc. are some of the popular forms of cyberbullying or cyber harassment. Education through online platforms expose the learners to the risks of cyberbullying, with the chance to affect their learning.

Negative Effects on Society, Community, and Culture

Humanity is in a historical transition. By moving away from the pre-digital era, we have now entered into a completely new era, where society, culture, art, humanity, politics, etc. are defined by the digital technology. With the arrival of the digital era, our traditional notions of society, community, and culture had radically changed. Globalization had blurred the geographical boundaries and digital technology had been instrumental in collapsing the cultural boundaries, hence the notion of culture and cultural identity needs to be understood in a new and complicated way. Apart from this, technology has its homogenizing tendency which is harmful for the socio-cultural diversity.

Recommendations

Considering the above-mentioned negative consequences of digitalization in education, the following recommendations are made with a view to eliminate or minimize the harmful impacts:

Government must adopt some measures to restrict the growing tendency of commercialization and commodification of education, because education is one of the fundamental constitutional rights of the Indian citizens. Otherwise, commercialization and commodification of education will deprive a large section of the Indian population of this fundamental right, the negative effects of which will not remain restricted to the lower sections only, but will affect the whole society.

To rectify the deficiencies created by digital divide, what is recommended is the investment of more government funding for the empowerment of the marginalized section or the low socio-economic groups. Researchers suggest that technology could not improve people's lives because digital divide has been treated as a technical issue rather than as a reflection of border social issues (Warschauer, 2002).

The objectives of digitalization of education will not be fruitful unless there is universal education in the society. Universal education will create an opportunity for every people to access digital world. But, it is wrong to suppose that universal literacy will make people universally literate in digital technology. Universal education must follow the universal digital literacy schemes, which will enable the people to access the digital world and to explore its tools.

Moreover, abolition of caste, racial and ethnic prejudices is also a necessary condition to harvest the benefits of digitalization of education. These forms of prejudice are very deep rooted in the Indian society because of its historical conditions. Universal education, equitable distribution of resources, sensitization of people about the democratic and human rights of the marginalized sections of the society, positive portrayal of the marginalized sections in cultural items, and obviously, the strong implementation of laws are some of the measures to fight against the problems created by digital divide in the Indian society.

To counter the burnout problems, what are urgently recommended are the effective support systems and reduction of workload.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that technology offers numerous advantages to research and academic activities, there are many teachers who still feel reluctant to incorporate technology in their teaching activities. In fact, even though digital technology has been exerting tremendous influences on our life, it can fairly be ascertained that it cannot altogether change the fundamental patterns of our life. "Our world is not *only* digital. We must hope that it never will be. Our world is full of subtleties and shades and moods that can't quite be digitised. To be digitised is to fit into a box..." (Denis, 2010). Researchers think that although there is a huge impact of digital technology on the academic activities, it is unlikely that technology will be able to bring about any fundamental change in the dominant campus cultures. Given the fact that both the traditional classroom teaching and online teaching have positive aspects, what is recommended is a harmonious combination of both the teaching methods. Too much dependence on technological instruments is not conducive to the development of proper knowledge in any subject. Similarly, traditional classroom teaching cannot solve all the problems of 21st century learners who are equipped with modern technology and high expectations. Digital technology should be judiciously used as an aid to education and it should be used to fulfil educational purposes. Measures should be taken so that digital technology does not turn out to be a barrier to education but a complementary tool to education. Digital technology should have an optimum utilization so that it can empower the students and can solve the diverse problems faced by the students in their life.

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