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FROM 'CLASS' TO 'SMART-CLASS' TO 'ONLINE CLASS': ACADEMICS AND THE QUESTION OF PARTICIPATORY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The classroom has undergone a profound transformation over the past few decades, moving from conventional, teacher-centric spaces to technologically enhanced smart classrooms, and most recently, to fully online and hybrid learning environments. This paper examines these shifts with a critical focus on the ideas of participatory and inclusive education. It discusses how the integration of technology has not only redefined access to knowledge but also altered the dynamics of engagement, collaboration, and inclusivity among learners. While smart technologies and online platforms have expanded educational possibilities, they have also introduced new barriers related to accessibility, equity, and meaningful participation. Through a critical analysis, this paper aims to illuminate the complex relationship between technological evolution and inclusive educational practices, offering insights into how future learning spaces can be designed to foster greater equity, participation, and belonging for all students.

INTRODUCTION

The covid19 pandemic has forced the teaching-learning communities to the digital worlds and opened a new set of challenges to attain the goal of Education. Ever since the innovation of the educational technologies, the academics have been witnessing the changing dynamics of the class i.e. the shift from the 'class' to a 'smart class' to an 'online class'. Every transitional period is welcomed with a promise of providing an inclusive and participatory education. The adapted technological tools in the educational institutions reduced the gap between the teaching and the taught and enhanced the teaching-learning experience, to an extent. In the first shift (class to smart class), the empty class got equipped with the computer, sound system, white screen & LCD projector, Internet, smart board and a smart TV. In the second shift, all this converged to a single device. The functionality of the educational aides that adorned the classroom comes to a rest and, moved the meat space classroom to digital spheres. Do these online classrooms has the capacity to accommodate a 'participatory concept of education'?. Are the digital pedagogical tools going to fulfil the educational needs of the students? Can an online classroom sustain for a longer period of time due to the absence of bodily human. Can the learning outcomes be achieved due to the transition in the existing teaching methods? Can the changing digital environments meet the evolving needs of the learning and teaching communities? With a focus on these above questions, this paper attempts to articulate the challenges that an Online classroom poses. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, combining a descriptive and analytical approach to examine the transformation of classroom environments and their implications for participatory and inclusive education.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the role of participatory and inclusive practices in shaping modern educational spaces.
2. To explore challenges and opportunities in ensuring inclusivity and active participation in digital and smart learning environments.
3. To analyze the impact of smart technologies and online platforms on teaching methodologies and student engagement.

CONCEPTUALIZING ONLINE CLASSROOM

A classroom is a place where a selected set of pupils come together and learn under the mentorship of a teacher. It is a platform to exchange ideas and thoughts, of diverse world views and different perspectives. It is a unit of a formalised institutional learning and an enclosed public space with a preset and well defined audience. The pupils are convinced to listen to the Teacher because of the established setting. The participation of the students in the discussions, debates and role plays allow them to engage in everyday interaction with the physical human. This humanly physical interaction is altered in the first transition period where a set of educational technologies mediated the classroom interaction enhancing the learning capacities of the students, which also simplified the teacher's job. Their presence made the class a smart class. The goal of the smart class is to turn the students smart and enhance participatory learning. This adornment of ICTs in the classroom progressed the participatory behaviour of the students. Educational technologies, in this case, are part of teaching-learning but not the stand-alone necessary tools. But, ETs re-conceptualized the structures of formal learning.

The classroom is also a space for social interaction. In an unmonitored classroom, students share their ear-piece, take selfies, dance, share food, play around, art the board and much more. The shift of this physical classroom environment to an online space vanishes the socio-cultural interactions that happen in a classroom along with the absence of classroom-

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student relationship. On a similar note, we can also not forget that class is also representation of the society. It's a sub-society. The formation of the students into groups for a socialised living help them share the thoughts and participate in collective academic and non-academic activities. It helps to develop a strong bond of healthy relationship among pupils. This is one of the significant characteristics of the classroom that makes the students human.

ABSENCE OF VISIBILITY

Non-verbal communication plays a significant role in any form of Communication. The movement of the body, hand gestures, facial expressions signify a meaning and completeness to the communication. Facial expressions are significant identifiers of human feelings and detecting facial emotion is quite an easy task for the human brain. The visibility of the students and teachers to each other continuously reminds them of the classroom as a space for structured formal and informal learning. The online classroom doesn't demand the visibility of the students, in some cases teachers, unlike the physical classroom that provides a scope for visual communication. The online classroom generates a void for visual response. Though the students can tap the prescribed icons to communicate, but that is limited, and barricades the scope for a participatory communication.

The invisibility of the students creates a sense of teaching the representative icons of the students rather than the students themselves. The digital representation of the students, in the form of alphabets/ numbers/ images, doesn't guarantee the complete presence of the students. The online classroom pushes the teacher-student to depend upon the auditory response to verify the presence of the student. The teacher has to constantly wait for the student to respond through auditory medium which causes a huge communication gap. The participation lacks the presence of the students in paying attention to the details of the subject being discussed/taught. The absence of the visibility of the teacher-taught constructs a dearth in the efficiency in learning. The theory of transactional distance by Moore emphasizes the geographical separation between students and instructor in distance education setting adds to understanding the complexity arising for communication(Moore, 2018). The theory argues that this distance causes a “psychological and communications gap”, within which “a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” exists. Compelling the students to be visible invites new socio-cultural differences among students. The physical classroom's demand of particular attire is absent in the online class because of the provision of invisibility. Turning on the camera invites the peers to look into the living standards of the student and provokes them to assess the socio-economic condition of their fellow mates. Using the webcam can also be perceived as tiring and constitutes an intrusion into privacy.

In the physical classroom, the body is present and the mind's presence is a question, depending on various factors. Whereas, in the online classroom, the presence of both body and mind is questionable because the student is not in the boundary of the classroom walls but in an easy entry-exit boundary of online digital walls where the students can join and exit at their own will.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The proponents of Information and Communication Technologies have admired the innovations in educational technology saying that it would augment the learning capacities of the students. Nicholas Negroponte says that Technology is foreseen as tool that can break the barriers and bridge the gaps in a social milieu(Negroponte, 1995). The use of technological tools as educational aides help the students in understanding the complex concepts in a more simplified process.

Drawing from Neil Postman's five ideas of technological changes, the second idea, which is that the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies are never distributed evenly among the population(Postman, 1998). This means that every new technology benefits some and harms others. The online educational practices reproduce a space for digital inequalities of learning where the students with high-end tech access receive the benefits of it unlike the student with digital poverty.

The quick unprecedented shift to a new medium to continue the academic progress of the educational institutions came along with a set of new challenges. Network irregularities, low memory, microphone malfunction, data deficiency etc. reduce the scope of teaching-learning. The inter-personal communication in the classroom spaces don't necessitate the technological presence since technology is not the medium. The pupils are connected in the classroom in meat space medium that allow them to participate in non-mediated communication. In case of online classroom, the access to the medium of internet itself is the pre-requisite to enrol as a student. Initially, technology is an additional tool that enhance the learning abilities which later converted to as the fundamental requirement to even begin learning. The change in the medium of instruction also welcome a new pedagogical methods to be applied to reach the learning interests of the students. In an online classroom, both the instructor and the instructed face the technical difficulties depending on their respective digital wealth. Referring to multiple websites for new teaching tools become a new task for the teachers. The consistent engagement with technology for communication of learning destabilize the existing pedagogies and invite a new pattern to communicate with the students.

In both the media, the instructional position of the teacher is unalterable that allows them to hold the control of the operator rights of the ICT tools in dealing the class and classroom. The instructor holds control over admitting a student to the online classroom, muting/un-muting, video access, removing the student etc. The pre-existing one-for-all devices in the physical classroom and the new online classroom platform is totally under the guise of the instructor. However, the hacking technologies over-write the control position of the teacher in some cases. Unregistered students attend the class and create disturbance by playing a music video or shout some irrelevant slogans or share obscene content on the screen. With such noises, the objective of a participatory education in an online

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classroom is at far reach. The reception of education through technological medium recommend wiring up of the houses, and the educational institutions wired-up when smart class came into picture. The ICTs pushed the learning systems to a stage where absence of technology equated with absence of learning i.e. 'No internet, No learning'. The choice-less adoption to online classroom doesn't count as an alternative to smart class but the only alternative left with. The active participation of students depend on multi-dimensional factors which include spatial location, high speed internet, device efficiency, memory availability. The adoption to online classroom also raises the question of efficiency in teaching-learning.

ATTENTION SPAN AND SPATIAL DISTURBANCES

A majority of the students use smart phones to attend the online classes because of its compatibility, mobility and convenience; also because of the non-availability of the PCs/desktop/laptops. This new age popular technological device is a convergent tool leaving space to the users for multi-tasking. Logging in to the online class doesn't guarantee the complete attention of the students and they may engage in social media, networking and gaming apps during the class hours. Monitoring the students attentiveness is quite impossible due to the invisibility of the students. The attentiveness of the students reduce from hour to hour due to the continuous exposure of the eyes and ears to the technological device. The digital students are not bound physically in the online classrooms which further allow them a movement from place to place while attending a class. This movement of the body minimize the attentiveness of the students since they are being present in dual worlds at a single time. In the study by Weitze, both students and teachers state that remote students learned less, were generally more passive, and often behaved like they were watching TV and not attending a lesson(Weitze, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The goal of participatory education through online spaces is still a big dream to be achieved, especially in digitally divided spaces. Enhancing the digital wealth of the students is the preliminary requirement to create and establish an inclusive classroom.

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