

Rejigging Teachers' Role During the Pandemic

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Abstract:

This article is a conceptual analysis of the role of the teachers during pandemic. It also takes into account how a teacher conducts his or her business of imparting education in the post Covid academic ecosystem. Besides, it covers a whole range of issues that brought a paradigm shift in the teaching pedagogies during Covid-induced restrictions. This research paper also attempts to highlight how 'care' of students by teachers is integral to the role of a teacher. The paper goes deep into the causes that shape the identity of teachers besides studying the status of the teacher. The paper raises a pertinent question as to how the lofty ideals of NEP -2020 can be realised without assigning a pivotal role to a teacher.

Keywords: Teachers, pandemic, technology, innovation, management, education

Introduction:

The whole world was thrown upside down by the novel Corona virus. A tiny virus that originated from Wuhan in China took the entire world into its vice - like grip. Lockdown was imposed worldwide to stop the spread of this highly contagious virus. India also imposed a nationwide lockdown of 68 days, which brought all activities to a grinding halt. However, two activities remained operational. Hospitals and health professional kept leading the nation against its fight against the deadly virus. Another activity that caught the Volume II, Perspectives - A Bilingual Interdisciplinary E-Journal, JDMC

attention of the world for the first time was the teaching-learning process/activity. This activity was not interrupted even for a day during the lockdown period. The mash-up of technology and the commitment of the teaching community keep the flag of education flying was the main driving force that did not allow the novel Corona virus to play havoc with the future of the students. The teaching community quickly and passionately embraced technology and came into action mode to pass on instructions to the students in an entirely new ambience. Their efforts bore fruits and the process of education was saved from being derailed.

Research Objectives:

The main objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To study the new role of the teaching community.
2. To present some successful pedagogic skills that can be followed in the post-Covid academic ecosystem.
3. To understand the critical role of technology in aiding the teaching learning process.

4. To understand as to what exactly the role of a teacher is.
5. To analyse factors that shape the identity of a teacher.

Research Methodology:

This study reviewed several online and offline articles on the issue that are related to the key areas of online education. It was basically a cross-sectional analysis.

Analysis:

Covid-19 was a bolt from the blue. It impacted every section of society. One category which was hit hard by the pandemic was the teaching community. Covid -19 threw normal life out of gear and compelled human beings to reorient their strategies to pull on with their lives. The teachers also restructured their teaching tools/methods to reach out to their students. Though it was a herculean task, the teaching community rose to the occasion. The teaching community is not a homogenous unit. The hierarchical structure in the teaching community has its own needs revolving around curriculum and pedagogical strategies. This posed a grave challenge to the community to get themselves tuned to various tools offered by technology to keep the teaching-learning process alive during the critical period of the pandemic. Teaching is not a mechanical exercise. It is rather an emotive exercise, wherein a whole spectrum of feelings are coalesced into one unit to transform information and above all to make students ponder over a wide range of issues. The lockdown did not shut down educational institutions only, it put the whole process of imparting education and instructions under lock and key. First, teachers were not very familiar with the technology and they did not know how to handle it. Since lockdown was not planned and it was imposed hurriedly to protect the citizens from the highly infective Corona virus, the teaching community was at a loss when they were asked to switch over to online mode. Besides, there were other hiccups, namely,

net connectivity, duration of the lecture to be delivered, time-table etc. Constraints with flexibility in time-table was itself a source of utter nuisance. There were other problems also. A teacher had to take care of his or her own children besides tending to the academic needs of their students. Since teaching-learning had gone online they had to monitor the online instructions which were being imparted by school and colleges o their own children. So, a teacher was caught in a very difficult situation. Yet, they handled the situation dexterously and bravely. Since teaching online was a new experience for the teachers across the globe, it was difficult for them to absorb the shock. Many serious challenges cropped up. A language teacher found it difficult to transmit instructions to his or her students online. Literature or language can be best taught in a physical environment. Since teaching of language and literature is more of an emotional exercise than a cognitive one , these subjects cannot be taught in the online mode. The challenge was huge. Yet, language teachers took the challenge head on and made their best efforts to teach stories, novels, and grammar via gadgets, a hitherto unknown pedagogical tool. The experiment was difficult to conduct but academicians across the globe carried out the difficult experiment of teaching language and literature the way it is taught in a physical classroom situation. Another peculiar problem that was completely ignored during the pandemic was how to motivate and train a tribe of teachers that was on the verge of retirement and was averse to the idea of using technology to transact the teaching-learning business. There was no mechanism available to organise training programmes for them. Yet, efforts were made to train them. Online orientation training programmes/short term courses were held to train both young and old teachers. Teachers themselves showed keen interest in leaning various e- techniques/strategies to connect themselves to their students. The speed with which the teaching community accepted the change and adapted themselves to the online mode of teaching clearly gave them an edge over the ugly situation created by the lockdown and saved the teacher- taught relation from being damaged during the pandemic.

In this peculiar situation, the roles were reversed. Teachers learnt how to handle and operate various technological gadgets from their juniors, including their children and grandchildren. This strengthened the centuries old notion that a teacher is always a student and never stops updating their knowledge. Thus, the pandemic induced lockdown came as a blessing in disguise for the teaching community as they had to undo the traditional mode of reaching out to their students and embrace new tech-mediated strategies or methodologies to enter into an unknown territory of virtual classroom. Initially, it put a lot of strain on the community and it found it very difficult to come to terms. It bred cynicism among a section of the community as they found technology driven instructions incomplete and asymmetrical. However, the stringent critics of online teaching ultimately fell in line during the course of time and embraced it with an open mind to preserve their status as transmitters of knowledge. In brief, it was an altogether different experience for the teachers and the taught. Teachers are eternal seekers of knowledge and their frontiers of knowledge keep expanding. They keep striving to gain and amass knowledge. Without this sacrosanct exercise, a teacher ceases to be a teacher. Like Ulysses, they keep exploring new and innovative ideas. 'To strive, to seek, to find and never to yield' is their motto. The Pandemic failed to deter the teaching community to chase their academic pursuits; it increased their hunger to explore the unexplored territory of e-books/knowledge. The Pandemic taught the significance of 3Ls to both teachers and students. These 3Ls stand for 'Life Long Learning'. The Pandemic made the teaching community give up the old and traditional mind-set and adopt technology to stay relevant in the system. It made clear to the teaching community that they were operating in a different age. It is an A-3 age. It stands for Anyone, Anywhere and Anytime. Now, instructions can be given any time, at any place and by anybody. The importance of big classrooms for the transaction of the teaching-learning business was rendered meaningless, albeit temporarily, by the Corona virus. That space was squeezed by internet driven online teaching. This gave a body blow,

though only partially, to the old notion that no business could be conducted without a school and a teacher. It introduced the concept of virtual classrooms with multiple teachers. To seek instruction from a school or college teachers became a thing of the past. Now, in a virtual classroom, there are teachers galore. One can watch videos posted by the experts/teachers on various social media channels. Now, YouTube is the classroom. Teaching in the classroom has become a Kodak moment. A Kodak moment stands for a short memorable moment. The Kodak entrepreneurs never realised that digital camera was going to become a reality in the times to come and they did not mould themselves accordingly. And, when the digital age unleashed its attack, Kodak became history. The same principle applies to the teaching profession. The old blackboard method is to be augmented with online mode of learning. It is an age of flipped classroom or blended teaching. Technology has changed the whole pedagogical paradigm of instructing in the classroom. It has made clear to all the stakeholders of the academic world that it is mandatory to adopt to new modes of pedagogical methods lest they should be rendered irrelevant in the academic ecosystem and be designated as 'Kodak moment Community'. It is a fact that technology is going to dominate academics in the post Covid environment. It is also a fact that physical mode of learning is not going to be completely replaced by technology. Yet, technology is going to dominate the whole system of education. Academic instructions would now be delivered by both, physical and online modes. This age would be called phygital. Already, the whole academic world across the world has experienced this big change. The big question/challenge is how to implement the phygital model effectively. Kolb's Learning theory can well explain this emerging concept of phygital model. This model puts emphasis on experiential learning. As per this model, a person experiences a feeling and then its gets transformed into a thought. This is how transformative learning process takes place. Since online teaching is a new phenomenon and not much discussion has yet been done on this issue, it is not very easy to say anything as to how phygital model of education can be strengthened.

The pandemic changed the way educators used to think and conduct their business of teaching. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, the word technology was used in a very general sense in the field of education. It was used in common parlance to denote a range of digital devices, online and blended systems, tools and other facilitating objects (Brown and Sammut, 2012). But, it is now used commonly in the field of teaching. Many teachers have already tuned themselves to this new mode of teaching. This new model (phygital mode of teaching) chiefly consists of three critical factors: Social element, Cognitive element and Teaching element (Garrison 2000). The Social presence stands for the ability of the participants to project themselves as real people, the Cognitive presence means drawing meaning through sustained communication, and the Teaching model is composed of the design of the educational experience and the creation of sound knowledge to help society. This whole process is described as Community of Inquiry (CoI) model. When a student interacts in an offline/online class with peers and teachers, a healthy exchange of ideas takes place which, in turn, adds to the confidence of students and improves their knowledge. The phygital mode of learning can help students present themselves as real learners and can interact with their educators and peers to gain knowledge. This will improve their cognitive behaviour, which in turn adds to their academic strength. Blended teaching model/flipped classrooms are the new designs that can be put into practice to pass on instruction from an instructor/educator to their students. The new mode of education can be broadly divided into two categories: Online; and Flipped classroom. They are also called synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning. Both teachers and students are present at one location in the synchronous mode of learning. Hence, it gives ample opportunity to students to ask questions and raise their doubts to get them resolved at the spot. Webinars, online classrooms, and video conferences are the examples of synchronous classrooms. On the other hand, asynchronous mode of teaching refers to a flipped

classroom wherein students are taught about the topics to be taken up in a physical classroom through recorded audios or videos. Hence, students have access to the previously recorded lecture videos of their teachers in addition to the online study materials (Hsiao, 2012). Kolb's Learning Theory also puts emphasis on what is called 'conversational learning' approach. The chief aim of conversational approach is to enable learners to convert meaning and experience into knowledge. The teaching community took the challenge head on and embraced technology with open arms to reach out to their students who were otherwise stuck in the dark ages. There are plenty of stories of teachers who tried to reach out to maximum number of students via technology. The arc of their teaching operation got a push with the use of technology and it expanded far and wide. Here is an inspiring tale of a maths teacher from Bhatinda, Punjab. Mr Sanjiv Kumar who was teaching mathematics at Navoyda Vidayala before the pandemic struck, immediately learnt how to handle technology to connect to his students. With an 18 years' experience under his belt, he made every possible effort to connect to his students. His efforts bore fruit. He also got connected to overseas students. This was how his passion to keep the flag of education flying during lockdown helped a number of beneficiaries (The Tribune, 30 Sept 2020). Women teachers also played a crucial role in engaging their students via online mode. Though they came across several challenges, they braved all odds and delivered their best. The women teacher had to face hostile students and demanding parents during the online delivery of instructions. A few bad students made online teaching a difficult experience for women teachers. Sleazy contents were posted on WhatsApp groups during online classes. Women teachers faced harassment. Coupled with online harassment, women teachers had to look after their families, children and kitchens. They put in their best efforts to maintain a perfect balance between their online classes and the classes of their children. They also had to attend to household chores. Yet, they played the role successfully.

Remote learning also exposed gender inequalities in the social set up of our system. The girl students were at great disadvantage. They were not allowed by their parents to use smartphones. And their phones were 'supervised' by their family members. It was really very difficult for teachers to conduct online classes. Yet, they went beyond such problems. They exceeded the brief. They convinced the parents or the caretakers of the girls students to allow their daughters to attend online classes. Another issue that troubled the teaching community was inaccessibility of the pupils to smartphones and internet. Poor parents could not afford a smartphone, let alone a separate set for each child. Poor internet connectivity in rural and hilly areas made it almost impossible for teachers to connect with their students. Yet, the brave teachers braved all odds and they carried out the teaching learning activity via SMSs or at a time when internet connectivity would improve in the area where the students were residing. There were certain instances where teachers pooled in resources to buy a smart phone to the needy and deserving students. A few teachers also got the internet pack of a few poor students recharged to keep passing out instructions to them. This was how the teaching community rose to the occasion. Teaching is not merely a passing of instructions. It is also about care- care for the physical, emotional and psychological needs of the students. Thus, a teacher is a care giver. Caring, kindness and emotionality are integral parts of teachers' work and personality. Without possessing these qualities, a teacher cannot transact their business effectively in the class. About caring, O'Connor says that while this choice led them to sometimes "get exhausted and think about certain kids all night". or be perceived in a disempowering way, all teachers engaged in teaching learning process consider care being an integral part of their professional identity (O'Connor,2008, p. 121).

O' Connor further described caring as the emotions, actions, and reflection involved as teachers help their students in a variety of ways. While caring appears to O'Connor to be an action,

Noddings describes care as a relation. Caring is not to be considered a set of rules or actions, it is “a response to individuals with whom one is in relation” (1984, p. 497). Thus, a teacher must develop a strong bond of camaraderie with her students to engage them in a constructive learning process. A teacher comes to know from a smile, a nod or a frown of their students whether the student is showing any interest in the lecture or not. During offline instructions, a teacher can notice the behaviour of their students and can plan the lecture accordingly. It can also help them understand the state of mind of a student. But in the online mode of instruction, it is very difficult for the teachers to keep tabs on the behaviour of their students. This disturbs the whole applecart of the teaching-learning process. As teaching involves emotions and is primarily driven by the element of care, online teaching denies this big opportunity to both, the teachers and the students. This is one of the biggest drawback of online mode of learning. The global pandemic caused a huge intrusion into the relationship between teachers and students. The difference between the out - of - classroom which includes policies, research, administration et al and in-classrooms that includes interaction with students was completely blurred. Teaching is primarily an interaction, and Covid-19 diminished this interaction, giving a body blow to the otherwise warm relationship between teachers and their students. Nias (1996), a writer about the moral nature of teaching, wrote about the intrusion that took place into the professional territory of a teacher as under:

Far more intense was teachers' and head teachers' reaction to what they saw as ‘intrusions’ into their physical or professional territories... Golby [Michael Golby, as in “Teachers Emotions, An Illustrated Discussion” (1996)] asked two experienced, committed women teachers in English schools, one primary, one secondary, direct questions about their emotional reactions to school life. The major source of their affective satisfaction and emotional security was what Golby describes as “the intimacy of teaching children.” Problems arose when other people—colleagues,

parents, OFSTED inspectors– breached, or threatened, the tight boundaries that they had drawn around this central area of their work. Then they felt anxious, impatient, distressed, depressed and angry (para. 26).

The challenge posed by Covid-19 brought into focus the identity of a teacher. Though it was a subject of intense discussion in the pre-Covid academic world, this question got the attention of the policy makers worldwide during the pandemic. Since the big responsibility to keep the teaching learning process alive falls on the shoulders of the teachers, renewed attempts were made to define the role and the identity of a teacher. It is a common belief that the identity of a teacher is a social construct. Society and its discursive discourses shape the identity of a teacher. Foucault argues that selves do not develop within a vacuum; they are implicated by exterior structures and regulatory forces. From Foucault's perspective, identity formation is a by-product of power/knowledge. Thus, the identity of a teacher depends upon discourses that society initiates in its set up. During the pandemic, the role of teachers was redefined. Their identity was strongly linked to the emotional support that a teacher provided to the students. A teacher was given the title of a mentor, helper and nurturer of students. Yet, the parts of a teacher's identity were determined by the interests of the stakeholders.

The role of a teacher underwent a complete change during the pandemic. A teacher became an important cog in the academic wheel. Had a teacher not responded to the disruptions caused by the novel Corona virus and not embraced technology to reach out to their pupils, millions of students would have been deprived of the fine experience of learning. This, in turn, would have weakened their academic foundation. Kudos to the teaching community for displaying unparalleled commitment to their profession. But, it begs the question: What role is government and society

playing to give teachers their dues? This is a very crucial issue. Society expects a teacher to be a babysitter. Yet, it does not want to give its due to teachers. The condition of teachers in the system is miserable. Their working conditions are deplorable. Most of the teachers in schools, colleges and universities are working on adhoc/temporary basis. Their salaries are peanuts. They are also subjected to a lot of unacademic jobs. There are different categories of teachers working under different categories like SSA, RMSA, Computer faculty, Shiksha Providers, Service Providers et al under different pay scales! This is sheer exploitation of teachers and it does not augur well for the society and country. The society should realise that teachers like physicians fought like warriors during the pandemic and kept the virus of ignorance away. Had the teaching community not taken the bull by the horns, the whole academic world would have plunged into darkness.

It is, however, ironical to note that the role of the teachers during the pandemic has not got the attention that it deserved. The focus was kept on latest technological tools, completely ignoring the roles of the teachers who dexterously navigated through the various technological tools to reach out to their students.

The National Education policy (NEP) 2020 also does not comment much on the role of a teacher. NEP puts emphasis on structural changes with respect to institutional restructuring and consolidation, transforming regulatory system, effective governance and leadership, inclusion of skill - based vocational education and internalisation of higher education. Alas, the crucial role of a teacher has been abysmally ignored! How can the lofty aims of NEP-2020 be realised without keeping the teaching community in its centre. NEP envisages an increase in the Gross

Enrolment Ratio(GER) to 50 percent by 2035. This lofty goal can never be realised without the active participation of the teaching community.

Conclusion:

The aim of this article is to introduce readers to the critical role that teachers played during the pandemic. The paper concludes after making a thorough analysis of the issues that are linked to the topic that there is a need to rejig the role of a teacher in the post-Covid environment. The paper concludes that technology can never replace a teacher from the system. Technology is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Secondly, a teacher can revolutionise the system if they are given what they deserve.

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