TRANSFORMING DISRUPTIVE ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY

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Introduction

The Academic community has traditionally been staid in its approach and there have not been significant, innovative developments for decades. The face to face (F2F) teaching-learning process has continued to dominate despite the advent of online learning. Educators and Faculty prefer the F2F mode from the viewpoint of convenience in responding to questions from a mass of students, carrying out interactive discussions and explanations/derivation/solving problems on the white board. Further, in regard to executive education, in India, most participants emphatically state their preference for the F2F mode of learning especially since they return to academics after a break and would like to leverage F2F faculty inputs. Around 5 years ago, during our Strategy Retreat, we had identified 'blended learning' as the future and had exhorted faculty to incorporate 'Massive Open Online Courses' (MOOCs) or modules from MOOCs in their curriculum. However, this did not take off, largely on account of the human psychology of comfort with status quo and consequent resistance to change. If one tries to analyse why the F2F mode is still popular, by and large, the answer seems to lie in the expressive power of good teachers/ faculty who with their communication skills are able to logically explain, convince and energise learners to not only learn from them but also from their peers in class. It is often said that teaching is a performing art. Consequently, the class performance of a good exponent of the art of teaching is a joy to behold and would naturally enthuse and elevate students to a higher state of knowledge absorption. Thus, the imprint left by the performing artist on the teaching floor has over the years ensured that the F2F mode of learning retains its primacy. However, the recent COVID-19 crisis has brought about a paradigm change in the outlook of educators and students.

Our Response to completion of class schedules

The Government of Karnataka's notification of March 13, 2020 announcing the closure of schools and colleges, followed by similar announcements from other states made it quite evident that it will be a long drawn out affair and it would not be possible for us to complete the academic curriculum in the normal F2F mode. Immediately, the university leadership decided to complete the balance portion of

the syllabi through the online mode of learning. On 16th March, we had a faculty meeting to discuss the challenges thereon and took a decision that some demonstration online classes using the WebEx and Zoom platforms would be held the next day. The consensus among the faculty was that Zoom was more user-friendly and accordingly it was decided to purchase about 20 Zoom licenses for a month to complete the remaining classes. Since then, we have been conducting on an average 75 to 85 online classes per day across our post graduate and undergraduate programs. By April 11, 2020 we have completed 1,720+ online sessions in 4 weeks. This mammoth task would not have been possible without the judicious use of technology, and the combined efforts/cooperation amongst faculty, students, academic coordinators and IT administrators.   The term Business Continuity Plan (BCP) is commonly used in regard to the operations of the IT industry but scarcely mentioned in the academic world. Nonetheless, without so much as having a BCP, we were able to commence online delivery of classes within 3 days of the Government's notification to close down educational institutions and send students home. This is a tribute to proactive decision-making and the human response during times of crisis/adversity. Whereas in the past 5 years, despite recognising the benefits of online learning, there was no wholehearted attempt to embrace it, the COVID-19 crisis provided us a perfect opportunity to radically transform ourselves into agents of change to meet our academic calendar deadlines. One of the acknowledged principles of 'change management' is that organisational change requires one or two champions to lead the effort. At NMIMS Bangalore, all the faculty including core and visiting became champions and put their best foot forward to ensure that the teaching-learning (T-L) process did not stop.

As a result, our academic schedules are being maintained except for a delay of two weeks in regard to the PGDM program where despite the academic delivery having been completed and examinations scheduled from March 24, 2020, students could not be asked to present themselves for exams following the Prime Minister's call for 'Lock Down' on March 23rd. The calendar of all the undergraduate programs is being scrupulously adhered to.

Quality of the T-L process:

The ODC platform equipped with Word and Excel sheets and white smart board apart from chat box, facility for raising hands is versatile. Use of shared Excel worksheets online and whiteboards provided by the ODC software make delivery of concepts and problem solving almost equivalent to the F2F mode. The chat box in

the software enables interaction and raising of questions by students. Thus, some of the faculty opine that engagement and class participation is better in the ODC mode.

In regard to the case method of teaching which is one of the pillars of pedagogy in most B-schools, the less personalised mode of the T-L process enjoins that Faculty are more structured and beforehand assign specific sections of the case or questions for pre-class preparation which are dutifully addressed by students. Faculty are also in a position to use the facility of polling for specific questions by using websites such as StrawPoll.com and Kahoot.com. This has facilitated greater engagement in the class. As a result, whereas earlier, the considered view of faculty was that ODC is not amenable for the case method of teaching, our recent experience seems to suggest that the universality of this contention might be in question.

Pathway to blended learning?

Quality of teachers: The success of the ODC mode has so to say bridged the gap between the very good and average teachers. In ODC, the very good teacher does not have a stage to exhibit his/her skills as the online platform is somewhat indifferent to stage presence of teachers and hence cannot be as much of a performing artist as in the F2F mode. To draw a cricketing parlance, in test matches the gap between the very good and average players can be considerable which is significantly reduced in a 50 overs ODI. This is encouraging for the education sector where there is a dearth of high quality F2F teachers.

Differential pace of student learning: If every course has an online module which students can complete at their own pace and soil their hands by solving problems/exercises and get tested at every stage, their fundamental concepts would be strengthened and the gap between slow learners and fast learners in terms of concept assimilation would be reduced.

The foregoing thoughts throw up an entirely different dimension to the T-L process where use of technology helps to not only bridge the gap between very good and average teachers but also between fast and slow learners. In view of the foregoing factors, there is every reason to believe that blended learning with F2F and ODC in equal measure might be superior to the conventional F2F and could be the answer to constraints such as shortage of quality faculty, prior class preparation of students, hands on practice for numerical exercises etc.

Innovative response to conduct of end-term examination

Once the challenge of completing the T-L process was overcome the next challenge was the conduct of the end term examination given the constraint that it could not be done in situ at campus. This ruled out the conventional pen and paper exam. The option of Online exams with proctoring by an IT service provider was examined. This had an inherent demerit in that students were spread across the length and breadth of the country and those who were from non metro/ semi-urban areas would have to contend with power outages and band width issues that would render the time bound online exam environment not entirely fair to everyone. As a departure from the conventional time bound examination, the university leadership team opted for Online exams or Take Home Exams (THE) that are open book and not time bound but may require data collection and collation, analysis, evaluation of options and are aimed at testing critical thinking and creativity skills of students. The backdrop to this decision was a research conducted by Lars Bengtsson (2019)[1] that concluded that "*THE may be the preferred choice of assessment method for higher order taxonomy levels because they promote higher order thinking skills and allow time for reflection*". Accordingly, faculty were advised to design THE in a manner that apart from application of concepts and analysis, it was possible to assess students' critical thinking skills and creativity. Now that all THE have been designed, the consensus among faculty is that this is superior to the traditional time bound exams and would stand students in good stead in their corporate careers.

Conclusion

If we were to assess our experience during the past few weeks and its impact on education/academia and society it would be thus:

1. The Online teaching -learning process in higher education is certainly effective. In some ways, such as making T-L more structured; promoting self-learning and prior class preparation among students and thereby reducing spoon feeding; it is perhaps more effective than the F2F mode.
2. Examinations need not be in situ on campus or even online; Open book Take home Exams designed to assess higher order thinking skills or Online exams are more effective, at least at the postgraduate level.
3. Blended learning as a pedagogy appears superior to the conventional F2F process both from the faculty perspective where there is a shortage of high-quality

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[1]Bengtsson, L. Take-Home Exams in Higher Education: A Systematic Review. *Education Sciences,* 6 November 2019.

teaching talent, and from the student perspective to equitably cater to fast and slow learners.

4. Blended learning with a fair share of pre-recorded lectures could also release more time for faculty to do research.

5. On the societal front, life is not normal yet. Yet, the teaching-learning process has gone on without loss of productivity and no interpersonal issues in the day-to-day working. These are pointers to a larger debate on "how can the workforce be made more productive".

6. The larger dimensions relate to substantially lower energy consumption and minimal pollution. This raises questions on the way we have been conducting our lives so far and what is a more appropriate solution from environmental and social cost perspectives.

We believe that the COVID-19 crisis in general and the response mechanisms put in place by NMIMS and other leading institutions will bring about a paradigm change in the way higher education is conducted in future and that the teaching-learning process will become more effective.