

Unlocking Minds in the Lockdown: Pros and Cons of E-learning Implementation

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Throughout the centuries several factors have impacted learning and teaching in a myriad of ways that has molded and modified the way we learn. One might argue the pros and cons of each of these changes, but we must accept that the actual impact and outcome is seen decades or even centuries later. Though human factors: the Islamic golden age of Al-Razi, the Greek philosophers Aristotle, age of western enlightenment Albert Einstein, have played an essential role in shaping what and how we learn. Natural phenomenon and calamities have pushed us to exceed and explore even further. What would not have seemed possible became essential and necessary for survival and so the end of the second decade of the 21st century became the, turning point in learning and teaching".

The paradigm shifts of pre-pandemic times; ignoring and trivializing virtual courses and degrees, to pandemic times; complete dependence on e-learning as a sole mean of pedagogic delivery is probably the biggest change in academia".

The idea of promulgating virtual learning as a foreseeable future and letting go of the more structured traditional classroom has now become an acceptable reality to many sceptics. This acceptability of a new norm and "unlocking of minds" has now created an opportunity to enhance and embellish the learning experience. Though some critics may say that this unlocking of minds is a ruse and farce, in-reality the physical interaction of students with teachers and their peers is irreplaceable. On the other hand, advocates for online learning argue of wider access through digital platforms, ease of communication, flexibility, provides uniformity and safety in the pandemic.

This is an era of multiple generations living together, from the baby boomers of 60's, Gen X workaholics, Gen Y the tech savvy millennials, Gen Z the youtuber centennials all are involved in some aspect of teaching and learning. It appears that the younger the age the easier it is in using new technologies and accepting virtual learning as the norm, digital natives. Thus, the older generation which includes most of the faculty and academic administrators find it conceptually difficult to grasp such a technologically

dependent idea: digital immigrants. The readiness to go online starts with the first step of accepting change and then taking measures to facilitate the academia to make it an easy and comfortable transition. Therefore, it is empirical to consider both the pros

and cons of online learning so that one can better prepare to face the challenges of working in this new environment as well as embrace the new opportunities that it has to offer.

Technology has proven to be a great enabler for learning and as a teaching and learning approach has gained immense popularity in the recent years. On the other hand, the excessive use of technology has also met with its fair share of criticism 1. This stage is not always smooth and effective, as seen during the current pandemic, the educational institutes, with little or no experience had to adopt e-learning rapidly with a rather steep learning curve. The difficulties arising may be attributable to the fact that successful on-campus face to face instruction does not always translate to an equally effective online instruction 2. Multiple stakeholders from students, faculty to even parents complicate this shift and so it is crucial to take into consideration the perceptions and practices of its main stakeholders and to remove any incongruence on how students and their teachers perceive e-learning implementation and usage. This mismatch may result in a compromised online program, lack of interest from the users and stress.

Pros

This widespread popularity of e-learning among students is also attributed to the fact that they can educate themselves in the comfort of their own homes. This approach undoubtedly offers exceptional opportunities to the people who would otherwise have limited access to education. There is a scope for students to personalize their

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learning in terms of schedule and timing especially when on-ground learning is difficult. Students can access the teaching material anywhere anytime 24 hours a day, seven days a week, thus allowing more time efficiency. Virtual classrooms are more dynamic, as e-learning, if implemented in its true spirit, has allowed more synergy. Each student can contribute to the course content, discussion and give and receive feedback. Thus, by sharing their feedback or point of view on online forums, students get more engaged and tend to tailor their learning experiences 3. It has now become easy to create online links with other institutes and remote learning sources thus allowing more interactive learning environment and self-directed learning. Students and teachers are one click away from the ocean of knowledge which is readily available online.

Cons

This, however, has resulted in a misconception that students can learn everything from free online sources such as Google and Wikipedia etc. In fact, these online links are regarded as a source of information overload as well as misinformation. Students consult these sources more and are drifting away from their standard textbooks. Teachers here need to take on the role of facilitators giving direction and guidance regarding the depth and authenticity of the information available. The teacher must work harder, be more into the new technology and have a greater understanding and latest trends of their fields so that students do not take this leverage and exploit it by not being punctual and inattentive during the online sessions. As there is a possibility of students getting carried away with this freedom of personalizing their learning and therefore lack standardization and uniformity in teaching and learning experience. For teachers along with planning lessons it is essential to prepare and master technology and motivate students to accept change .

Thus, the key points in implementation of such an e-learning environment are leadership and communication, deployment of technology, particularly 1:1 computing, implementation of learning management (LMS) tools allowing for the creation of materials that can be used online for student instruction, experience with using online learning methodologies: such as blended learning, flipped learning, virtual and online learning, and school technical support for students.

In order, for an online program to be successful and effective, all the stake holders, curriculum and the technology must be considered carefully and balanced to take full advantage of the strengths of this format and at the same time avoid pitfalls that might rise from its limitations.

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