

How to make digital education more accessible

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The rapid growth of the education sector in recent years and growing proliferation of digital technology have led to an era where e-learning is becoming a norm in almost all institutions. Leveraging technology to the benefit of society is extremely desirable. However, the disruptive influence of e-learning over conventional methods needs to be assessed critically and mid-course corrections need to be applied where necessary to make a robust, well balanced approach. That e-learning is flexible and allows better management of time is well-known. However, this flexibility could easily transform into casualness and trivialise the learning process itself. Constant supervision and motivation will be necessary to ensure that e-learning conforms to a gradual, step-by-step approach.

One of the major advantages of e-learning platforms is that they allow students to progress based on their intellectual capacities and the levels of comprehension. Fast learners could potentially navigate faster through the curriculum while others may labour over the same. This disparity in comprehension conflicts with the first principle of e-learning which is equitable and uniform delivery of knowledge. Lack of teacher control in predominantly e-learning environments could thus lead to vast disparities in learning and subsequent outcomes in terms of knowledge, output and confidence.

Digital education promotes universal content and thus aspires to achieve uniformity in education. However, is this uniformity desirable beyond a point? Or is tailor-made content based on individual needs and aspirations more desirable? If the aim is to ensure a progressive society at large, we need to ensure wider delivery of knowledge rather than uniformity of content.

While discussing the disparity in absorption thresholds of the students, one must not forget that in the business of digital learning, teachers are also constant learners and the technological challenges apply equally to them also. Furthermore, while conventional teachers come out of the formal system of teacher training, most content writers of e-learning packages are tech-savvy IT professionals proficient at digital content creation with little or no exposure to the classroom environment. This gets reflected in the content which is rich, packed with information but

extremely impersonal.

Another aspect of digital education is accessibility and affordability. The Digital India initiative is still finding inroads into small towns and rural India where the majority of India resides. The access to basic infrastructure — buildings, electricity and Internet is still inconsistent. There is a huge deficit in trained and qualified teachers.

In many areas, primary education is being imparted in regional languages leading to the challenge of creating multiple content platforms. All this requires huge investment and until the public sector creates the basic infrastructure needed for e-learning platforms and makes it affordable, many sections will still be deprived of it.

Change in mindset

For e-learning to fully replicate the conventional system, a change in societal mindset is required. The conventional school has a strong institutional connect with the Indian mind. The tradition of *guru-shishya* is held in high reverence and reaches far beyond mere imparting of knowledge to teaching other social graces and life skills. Homeschooling and distance learning are still considered taboos used to correct educational imbalances rather than mainstream options for education.

Since e-learning remains a largely isolated and individual activity, there are very few feedback mechanisms available to constantly identify gaps in learning and correct them. This could lead to voids in knowledge or at best, extremely focused. While such a situation is good for higher education and research programmes, the human interface is an absolute imperative in the primary level of education.

The disruptive influence of e-learning is here to stay. The young learners of today are comfortable with electronic devices and will easily adapt to technology. However, e-learning cannot and must not replicate the conventional means. We must harness technology to deliver knowledge efficiently and expand its reach and penetration to larger society.

For this, digital education must not remain an elitist enterprise confined to a few private institutions. Its growth must be fully led by government through incentivising e-learning and supporting it through adequate infrastructure and skills.

(The author is with Made Easy School, Gurugram)



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