Communication in Metamorphosizing Classrooms: Reflections on Teaching During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Classrooms transformed into digital spaces as the Covid pandemic led to a closure of physical access to infrastructural facilities in educational institutions. As students and teachers struggled to accustom themselves to this new world, marked by uncertainty and confusion, logistical issues of engagement between teachers and students emerged. Nature and patterns of communication, that were hitherto taken for granted, required reflection. Meaning making in communication relied entirely on verbal interactions as gestures and facial expressions were obscured. This article reflects on the experience of teaching in higher educational institutions in India and explores the impact of digitization on communication in classrooms.

Keywords: Covid-19, classroom spaces, online teaching, communication, teacher student relationship

The pandemic has brought to the fore the experience of being isolated and confined. Physical and psychological isolation provides for rumination that can be simultaneously insightful and disdainful. Constrained home atmosphere is likely to increase the need for expression and psychosocial support. Colleges have been observed to provide a space to young adults to break away from limitations of family and the larger social world and express themselves. During the pandemic, access to such a place was obviated. The helplessness was exacerbated by the incomprehensibility of the potentially deadly virus. The initial excitement
of living in changing times soon gave way to dread as news reports of mass unemployment, financial losses, uncertainty and the rising death toll resulting from the virus, flooded electronic and print media. In such a scenario, being able to speak to a concerned adult would have served to provide students with comfort and emotional support. Referring to Kafka (1912), Rivieccio (2020) writes: “Coming to terms with the reality that his entire existence has been lived senselessly and without the kind of rumination required in order to make sense of it, Gregor is, in so many ways, just like the average person at this moment in time wrestling with the notion that, for most of their lives, all they’ve been doing is plodding along at a breakneck speed solely for the purpose of keeping their head above water. With this fast-paced, unrelenting monotony stripped away in favour of a starker, more sobering one, a great many people have been forced to recognize the meaninglessness of their existence.”

Gregor Samsa tried to make sense of his transformed world and his place in it. Many individuals similarly experienced a sense of surrealism. Observing the world from the confines of their world, people watched the absurdity stemming from the inadequacy of the pharmaceutical industry and governments across countries, in handling the virus. The impact of the metamorphosis in the world has also metamorphosized many individuals into questioning the things that were earlier taken as given and led them to hopelessness and pessimism. As young adults struggle to form their world into a coherent whole, they are also simultaneously wondering about the education that online classrooms can provide.

The change experienced during the pandemic was at the covert level as well. The classroom space metamorphosized, without an option of reverting to the pre-metamorphosis stage. The pandemic brought about several changes. Foremost among those was a restriction on movement and social interaction. Access to gadgets and the internet served to bridge this gap. They provided possibilities of interaction over distances, entertainment and education. Being confined to home spaces also brought family members together who were used to spending several hours away from each other on a routine basis. This shared space posed restrictions to free and open conversations between students and teachers.

At the outset, the transition from face-to-face to online classrooms
appeared temporary, but two years hence, the change is now seen as semi-permanent. As teachers got accustomed to online classrooms, running in both asynchronous and synchronous modes, administrators and policymakers are recognizing the potential of online teaching in transcending time and space. Students and teachers have benefited from asynchronous learning and use of digital platforms for content creation, sharing knowledge, task management and assessment. All these contribute towards enhancing learning experiences.

The Government of India, in its National Education Policy 2020 has also recommended that education should move towards online and blended mode. Accordingly, various sub sections under Section 24 of the policy document, recommend pilot studies for online content creation as well as building digital infrastructure, content creation and exploring options of running courses online (MHRD, GoI, 2020). This indicates that classrooms in India’s future will likely be characterized by a strong digital presence.

This article explores how a change in classroom spaces has also led to the change in communication between teachers and students.

**Tracing the Trajectory of Switching to Online Teaching**

Following the spread of novel Corona Virus, in March 2020, the Government of India imposed a ‘Janata Curfew’ that restricted movement of citizens, considering the increasing corona cases in the country. Educational institutions were shut down. As weeks extended into months, teachers were left to grapple with shifting to online education. Each institution developed a different policy to meet the emerging needs. As situations kept changing, there emerged a requirement to frequently revisit what was decided just a few weeks ago. In many state-run higher educational institutions in Delhi, the academic session was ending. Through a college notice, teachers were asked to ensure that reading material be made available to students in digital mode. Most students and teachers were connected through groups on social media apps. Over frantic phone calls, teachers discussed possibilities of digitally scanning texts and copyright issues emanating from it. In several conversations, we wondered if communication with students through social media platforms constituted an official mode. If it did, how would we prove that we had been able to meet students’ needs?
Parallelly, communication with students over chat messengers and phone calls was replete with questions about what was planned for their courses. Teachers’ anxieties were magnified even as they attempted to allay students’ anxieties. In the months that followed, the more enterprising teachers started looking for web conferencing software and apps that would not breach the privacy of teachers and students. As software companies raced to provide advanced features for work from home options, educators learnt to use software primarily designed for the corporate world, to suit their needs. Asynchronous modes of teaching slowly paved the way for synchronous teaching.

The sudden declaration of lockdown left little time for educational institutions for preparation. There was no time to train teachers. It was several months before institutions realized that this arrangement was not temporary. Teachers made makeshift phone stands, learnt to use software, and equipped themselves with whiteboards, microphones, speakers, and teaching pads. The process was iterative, based on trial and error, rather than one based on informed, well thought out decisions.

**Perils of Verbalising All Communication**

Hawkins et al., (2013) reported that increased interaction between teachers and students in online spaces positively impacted learners’ successes. Communication between teacher and student is often content specific, restricted to questions asked by the teacher. In a face-to-face classroom, much of this communication is also non-verbal. Teacher initiated communication is for introducing new concepts, clarifying a topic, asking questions to evaluate the students’ learning. Students ask questions to clarify doubts or respond to the teacher. In a progressive classroom, students may have greater involvement in lesson development. In either scenario, an offline classroom provides space for non-verbal communication. In offline mode, we do not have to repeatedly ask the students if they have understood the topic being taught. Through expressions, a nod, a smile or any gesture of acknowledgement, we are able to gauge if students have understood. Similarly, facial expressions are often enough for teachers to know if a concept has not been accepted by the students. This serves to identify spaces where college curriculum is creating dissonance, disconnect or disequilibrium in students’ comprehension. We also perceive through non-verbal expression whether a student is in doubt, wants to share a thought, or needs a
topic to be exposited. “In a physical classroom, interaction can include verbal communication, eye contact, and other non-verbal cues that help teachers establish connections with students and monitor their learning. However, many such forms of communication became particularly challenging during online instruction, as the teachers and students did not share the same physical space. This complicated interactions among the whole class and made it difficult to monitor the reactions or attention levels of other students while responding to an individual” (Cao et al., 2021, p. 164).

In online classrooms, most students prefer to keep their cameras switched off because of privacy issues, multitasking, low internet bandwidth, being conscious of sharing their home environments with the teacher or other students (Almendingen et al., 2021). A lack of face-to-face interaction impacts the teaching learning experience for both students and teachers (Tyagi & Malik, 2020). In my classes, I was perturbed that I could not see students’ facial expressions. This meant that I could not use non-verbal expressions to support my teaching. Much of the teaching therefore was restricted to communication that I initiated. This was particularly true of large classrooms. Students often speak only when called upon, sometimes choosing to remain quiet or even exit the classroom when personally addressed. In an online classroom, communication is thus more teacher-directed than in face-to-face mode. Even if a flipped classroom approach is used, in large classes, the teacher remains in charge of the class, asking students to take turns to speak only when they are called upon. When students cannot see each other, they are unable to gauge when a peer wishes to share. This makes it difficult for introverts to participate in the class. Student initiated communication flows more organically in face-to-face mode.

Teachers often infuse the classroom with humour. Through students’ expressions, the teacher tries to gauge students’ responses to the humour. As has been discussed above, this non-verbal assessment of real time classroom environment is no longer at the teacher’s disposal. In addition, teachers are often conscious of the idea of classes being recorded, sometimes at the behest of school authorities and at other times unofficially by the students themselves. Incidents of parents sitting with students while their classes were in progress and commenting on the teachers were also reported. In such situations, the teachers also become conscious of switching on their cameras. This further restricts student
engagement as they are also unable to understand teachers’ expressions when the concept is being explained. For instance, students’ responses to open ended questions do not fit into binaries of correct or incorrect. In a classroom, the teacher can communicate through non-verbal means, encouraging other students to build on the answer that one student has provided. This pause that need not have been verbalized, now needs to be communicated orally to students. The choice of words here is more likely to indicate that the students’ answer is incorrect or at the very least inadequate. This verbal interaction which could have been avoided in face-to-face mode has the potential to make a student wary of henceforth responding in the classroom. Similarly, non-verbal communication was often enough to check students’ attention in the classroom. The distracted student staring outside the window, doodling on paper or chatting with friends, could very easily be brought back to the classroom. In the online mode, much of the time, the teacher is not aware of the attention, or lack thereof, of students present in the class. To address this, I ensured that my camera was on during online classes and students could see what I was doing. This included taking note of their responses, marking attendance, struggling with technology and even sipping tea! They could see my workspace and could connect to the background noises at home. I felt that this familiarity eased them and reduced their hesitation to unmute or turn on their cameras. I once showed my classes how I keep track of the frequency of their interaction by marking their name in a list when they asked a question or responded to one, made a comment or shared an insight by speaking or writing in the chat box. When students were quiet for consecutive classes, I sent them a gift of a dancing giraffe in their personal message box. This was a reminder that giraffes are quiet animals but I would appreciate if the quiet giraffes would dance in my class with their thoughts and ideas. I noticed that interaction in my class improved subsequently. The record of student interaction also helped me to track if I was dominating talk time in my class, giving the opportunity to speak to only a few students. I subsequently discovered a browser extension that tracked how many minutes and words did each participate speak in a given session. I shared the discovery with my students who quickly requested me to not share the tool with other teachers. This indicated that their hesitation to speak continued in online classes.

I also observed that students often hesitated in sharing their opinions
freely when they were sharing the space with other members of the family. On issues related to gender, challenging social issues, and stereotypes, students hesitated in sharing their thoughts and ideas in fear of retaliation from their family members. The secure space that the college provided them to express their thoughts freely in words and actions could not be provided through digital classrooms. This imposed limitations on the growth of ideas, open exchange of perspectives, transcendence of the restrictions that home spaces and society place on them.

(Absence of) Student Engagement

The first mark of the absence of student engagement comes from a lack of response from students when their names are called out in online classes. Online classes have provided a space where students are not compelled to speak. Students can choose to exit the classroom. This may be to avoid speaking in the classroom. This freedom to leave the classroom space if and when they desire, has furthered the gap between students and teachers and lessened their interaction.

Many students hesitate to express themselves in the classroom. This may be because in online spaces, what students speak is not missed by teachers and students in simultaneous chatter of others. Particularly through small group exercises or engaging with individual students while the rest of the class is engaged in their own work, the teacher was able to monitor student participation and progress. In addition, students belong to diverse backgrounds. Students often do not have separate rooms or a place to study. Family members share spaces and students are conscious of background noise and distractions. They are also conscious of speaking in class lest they be interrupted by or made fun of by members of their own family. This was even more pronounced in classes that were based on performing arts.

Engagement of students and teachers outside the classroom was also limited. For instance, if a student was more interested in a particular topic, they are likely to approach the teacher after the class. The teacher could have provided additional references or discussed a topic while walking towards the staff room. Creating such a space now requires additional effort on the part of the teacher. A conscientious teacher, who was vigilant, and was able to spend time in creating these spaces, could
possibly communicate to students that they were free to approach them. This required engagement in the teacher’s free time. In many places, online class time was monitored and teachers did not get breaks in between classes. The engagement between students and teachers about topics that were of interest to them thus stretched beyond teaching time. As boundaries between home and education spaces blurred for students and teachers, there was greater hesitation on both sides to engage in activities other than curricular essentials.

Students were often able to engage with each other while transitioning between classrooms in physical college spaces. This time between classrooms was a time for free engagement. Even while sitting in the same classroom, students were able to find time to engage with each other in between classes, as one teacher exited and the other entered. During classes, when the teacher was busy talking to one or more students, others engaged in friendly banter. These free spaces were used by students to express themselves and develop friendship bonds that would have lasted a lifetime. Contreras-Castillo et al. (2004) reported that informal interaction through video conferencing helps students establish better social relationships with their teachers and peers. Informal communication that helps students find like-minded individuals has diminished. Most communication is restricted to a formal exchange of notes and ideas, often only within classroom spaces. Particularly students who have transitioned to higher education after the pandemic began, have never met their peers, and do not feel comfortable in calling each other after class hours. Many do not know each other well enough to engage in informal conversations. In addition, there is limited engagement in college cultural committees and societies, further reducing exposure to people from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds. Such restrictions on communication have reduced spaces for voicing out challenges, coping with stresses and venting their woes.

In addition to lack of access to free spaces, a further restriction is imposed by reducing all communication to the written form. Communication is restricted to social media apps and learning management systems. The relative permanence of the written word has led to communication being restricted to what is necessary. Students and teachers hesitate in putting thoughts and ideas in the written form lest it be misunderstood. Coping with life, helping each other and mental health concerns are left unaddressed. To provide them a space for informal communication, I
created online links for classes that they could join in my absence. I would deliberately join a few minutes later or leave slightly early. The chatter would immediately stop after I joined the class. I realized that I was able to create a space for students to share difficulties and challenges faced in meeting deadlines, completing the tasks assigned by teachers, making sense of the assignments together and sharing pressures and stresses with each other. Much of these could not be discussed at home with parents and siblings who are not engaged in the same courses. Borup, Walters and Call-Cummings (2020) write, “While learner-learner interactions appeared limited, students noted the interactions with peers could help them on assignments, stay motivated, maintain interest in the course, and progress through the course” (p. 211).

**Communication Beyond the Online Classroom**

In the online mode, communication is not restricted to classroom spaces. Besides explanations and instructions during synchronous teaching sessions, much communication also takes place in asynchronous mode. These include instructions and guidance for assignments, using learning management systems for sharing resources, submitting and correcting assignments. Written communication is formal and relatively permanent. Often in the face of doubt, teachers and students refrain from detailing out descriptions and keep communication cryptic and to the bare minimum. A free flow exchange of clarifying doubts, sharing thoughts, co-developing learning trajectories does not take place in the written mode as organically as it does in oral, spontaneous communication in the classroom. Instructions are unidirectional rather than bidirectional. The teacher gives instructions and students comply. This goes against the fundamentals of a democratic classroom space that warrants at least a near equal participation of students in learning and assessment.

Another significant aspect of communication is providing feedback to students on their work. Feedback on students’ works is not restricted to giving grades and marks. “Specifically, feedback is more effective when it provides information on correct rather than incorrect responses and when it builds on changes from previous trails” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85). Teachers can help students frame sentence structure, paraphrase ideas, and learn how to write well structured, coherent essays. Often teachers would sit with students on an individual basis, giving them feedback on how they can redraft their work. This kind of personal
engagement with students became difficult during the pandemic. In the absence of adequate training and access to resources, teachers also did not have the wherewithal to annotate and comment on students’ works. As a substitute, teachers started giving generic feedback to the whole class rather than giving individual feedback that is focused on the specific answer that the student had written. The inability to use feedback as a valuable tool of assessment to support learning, teachers have been forced to shift towards assessment of learning.

Seeking Meaning

This article has explored the transformation that online education has brought in communication between teachers and students. At the beginning of this article, it was highlighted that this metamorphosis appears to have a lasting impact on the future of classroom spaces, and therefore on communication. Given the numerous benefits of online education, teachers and students will have to work together to reconceptualize how digital spaces can be reconceptualized to derive meaning from interpersonal engagement. Traditional modes and conceptualizations of communication may no longer hold relevance. Policy makers and administrators will also be required to rethink their expectations from education in the online mode. Trying to replicate the offline mode of teaching into the online mode is likely to be difficult, unnecessary, and inadequate. Administrators in educational institutions must acknowledge the need for teachers to learn to use technology. The classroom space is continually evolving in physical and online mode. It would not be wise to stand in the face of transformation in educational spaces and ignore the benefits of digital education. Besides the unending array of online courses that teachers are rushing to keep up with.

Given the role that teachers play in the lives of students, it would be beneficial if teachers actively envision their roles as mental health practitioners. If online education is to continue, they will need to find spaces, and modes to address the emotional needs of students.

A key role can also be played by the information technology industry. Teachers have hitherto adjusted to the software developed for the corporate world and adapted it to use in the world of education. It would be beneficial if the needs of communication in online teaching and learning were identified and resources developed to match these needs.
References


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