Riding Blackboards to Saddling Smart phones – Teacher Beliefs and Challenges amid Covid-19

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Abstract
Teaching is a continually-evolving dynamic process. Ever-changing education needs demand teachers to be flexible and adaptive in order to achieve learning outcomes. Teachers’ beliefs are significant in comprehending teachers’ thought processes, teaching methods, and learning to teach. They also help teachers to espouse their teaching strategies for coping with their teaching challenges, and shape language learners’ learning environment. This paper ascertains teachers’ readiness towards technology interfaced-teaching-learning processes and the need for teachers’ broader understanding of faceless and face-to-face teaching environments amid pandemic. It also investigates the challenges and problems that the teachers face while embracing and implementing technology in English classroom. The study is carried out, considering the teachers of state-run Model schools of Telangana adopting qualitative methodology. The results of the study indicate that teachers seem to embrace online-learning platforms in pandemic time – ‘opportunity’ excesses and these teachers are prepared for the post pandemic education requirements. However, there is a higher need for streamlining technology readiness and awareness into professional, well-organised E-Classrooms. We need to think beyond norms and comfort, and see how much more can be achieved through simple, easy technology options. Informative, relevant, short podcasts, television classes and the common social media platforms can be some immediate measures for ensuring continuity to this process.

Keywords: Teachers’ Beliefs, Professionalism, Readiness, Using technology, Online-teaching, Covid-19

Introduction:
Humans as a race confronted trials since the evolutionary times - adversities and grinding work are typical of most modern-day professions. Over the last century, racing through the millennia, teaching fraternity have been continually upskilling themselves and yet Gen X continues to struggle to meet, match and mentor Gen Y, Z and now the Covidians. Keeping abreast of changes in education and technology, adapting them, not limited to but including - continuous learning, 21st century readiness et al. are the norm for current day teachers. Many a parent would certainly vouch for teaching and teachers during the Covid times being - the silent and unseen work force. Even though teachers understand the need to change and improve on their methods and approaches to achieve expected outcomes, challenges from the existing education system and administrative limitations remain as major blocks to aspiring teachers. Deeper understanding of these situations and challenges helps one in being cognizant of solutions and opportunities to use various techniques, provide right direction and suggest suitable teaching strategies to enable change. Even then, the question that still remains is – how uniform would the application of these methods and strategies be, by teachers at large?

According to the OECD report, teaching strategies are not mutually exclusive, which demand the instructor a constant change in roles, to adjust to the kind of instruction being implemented. (Donné, Fraser, & Bousquet)

The disruption created by Covid ushered in an array of reforms. Those that otherwise would be close to impossible, if not for this world wide need for change. We are a generation whose perspectives rooted
from over a century are profoundly challenged, scraped and revitalised - basic habits varying from that of hygiene and food, to work and health lifestyle, methods of education and entertainment, mode of economy - now relying primarily on near to home, promoting self-reliance – are all revamped. These times have seen numerous examples of teachers adapting to sudden changes, equipping themselves with whatever limited resources at hand and making learning possible.

There is a paradigm shift witnessed in the education sector in India for last two months. Schools and teachers have been forced to adapt to e-learning leaving the traditional way of teaching. The adaption of technology was reluctant for many teachers and schools. (Samantaray, 2020).

Teachers adapted not necessarily for the principle of practice alone but as an obligation to sustain employment. This remains to be the raison d'être for them to choose teaching profession – a source of income, rather than a career driven by passion or even purpose. Technological preparedness or scholastic readiness are key concerns – yet teachers signed in for online sessions. This led to quite a few disconcerting technology plights, classroom management issues which are now virtual, cases related to misuse of social-media and technology, aspects linked to understanding learning and assessing outcomes. For every online teaching-learning process, the initial glitches are but expected and unavoidable even at professional level seminars and conferences as witnessed by everyone who took part in webinars and zoom calls. The present study aims at:

→ Knowing how effective are online/virtual teaching-learning practices.
→ Identify disparities between faceless and face-to-face teaching environments
→ Propose simple solutions to ensure effective online teaching

Literature Review
Teacher continuous learning remains an important element for academic growth. It ensures active learning on part of the student and an effective classroom. Commitment and passion of a teacher is reflected in their ability to learn, observe, research, innovate and translate their learning into student learning. Effective teacher qualities as stated by (Tucker, P. D., & Stronge, J. H)

→ Dedicate extra time to instructional preparation and reflection.
→ Enhance instruction by varying instructional strategies, activities, and assignments.
→ Demonstrate effectiveness with the full range of student abilities in their classrooms, regardless of the academic diversity of the students.

Schools around the world are at crossroads, education is being redefined while parent, student and educator’s trio are realigning learning altogether. Dynamic teaching practices that are not limited to gathering information on various good practices but essentially inspire teachers to put them into practice.

Teacher professionalism was correlated with each of the three factors of professional development (independent learning, cooperative learning and in-service learning). The correlation is significant between teacher professionalism and each of the three identified variables of professional development. Kok- Aun Toh , Cheong- Hoong Diong , Hong- Kwen Boo & Soo- Keng Chia (1996)
Chalk-and-board teaching is turning futuristic with teachers relying on various gadgets albeit at a basic browsing and video sharing level (Cortez 2017). Smart phones are essential part of teacher’s classroom tools and self-learning, keeping themselves and their learners connected, engaged and informed. This shift in education from traditional classroom learning to computer-based learning might be one of the largest educational experiments to date, remarks Shatakshi Lall, & Nardev Singh (2020). Being well-informed is first-step to preparedness of a teacher for her classroom. Through technology based self-learning - resilient teachers develop multiple approaches to support classroom learning. He/she will be able to make informed and intelligent decisions thus achieving learning outcomes with and for the learners. The new NEP will now more than ever mandate teacher adaptability to change and learning, and an immediate need to upskill. Post Covid times would inevitably bring together conventional teaching and tech smart lessons to align seamlessly and usher the new era of learning. Covid did present everyone opportunity and time - to upskill themselves. Self-learning as adults allows one to design their learning experience, choose according to interest and learn at one’s own pace. Absence of stress, peer pressure and academic deadlines allows focused improved learning.

Instruction, content, motivation, relationships, and mental health are the five important things that an educator must keep in mind while imparting online education (Martin, 2020). Some teaching strategies (lectures, case-study, debates, discussions, experiential learning, brainstorming sessions, games, drills, etc.) can be used online to facilitate effective and efficient teaching and learning practices.

"The teachers’ presence during the course, his or her interactions with students and the quality of the videos presented are significant determinants of course completion" (Gregori, Zhang, Galván-Fernández, & De Asís Fernández-Navarro, 2018).

As identified in the Australian perspective on What works in online: Distance teaching and learning (2020), evidence about both what works in achieving student outcomes and what students/teachers report as successful in online/distance learning can help guide teachers facing the challenges of transitioning their classrooms from business as usual, face-to-face learning to online or remote education.

Research Questions

Section 1 Teaching Learning Practice
1. How important are textbooks in the process of teaching/learning?
   a. indispensable  b. as support and reference  c. customary
2. Share your thoughts on - ‘discover the syllabus, follow the curriculum’
3. State two of your best teaching techniques for ESL.
4. What types of instruction technology do you use for teaching ESL?
   a projectors  b smart boards  c computers  d mobile
5. During the process of your teaching/student learning, attention is given to the development & application of:
   (You may select more than one box)
   Knowledge/content Language specific skills Literacy skills Communication skills
   Creative skills Thinking skills Interpersonal skills Cross-curricular links

Section 2 In and Off the Covid
6. What role can teachers play in times of Covid?
7. What methods can we adopt to deliver learning during these times to students with no media access?
8. According to you what role does technology have in schools of the future?
9. Two major changes you foresee, post-Covid - broadly in education, specifically in your line-of-work - ELT?
10. Does advances in e-learning leave the educationally disadvantaged behind? How?
Section 3 Reflect
11. How much time you spend on internet (per day)?
12. What is your main source of ICT – Smart phone or Computer?
13. How essential is technology for your teaching learning process?
14. Are you ready for the changes in education that you may be compelled to accept due to the Covid?
15. What support do you need to keep yourself equipped and ready to teach?

One line of inspiration on future of education.

Methodology
Qualitative questionnaire which is observational and descriptive is used to gather facts from teacher’s who are fulfilling language teacher roles. Their perspectives related to education system and its readiness to enable learning - during and post-Covid situations were analysed. The teachers of state-run Model schools of Telangana volunteered, they were given freedom to express their views in response to the open-ended question asked without any influence or clues from the researcher. Convenience sampling was used to select participants based on availability.

The purpose of the study was to investigate teacher’s readiness to online teaching-learning process and identify the challenges therein. This study involved a survey through a questionnaire consisting 15 questions that enquired teacher's readiness to learning, embracing technology interfaced classrooms, understanding teacher beliefs and actual situations in current times. Data obtained from this questionnaire survey provided indirect evidence of teacher’s thoughts, techniques practiced and challenges faced. It served to broaden understanding of teacher’s readiness to learn about and conduct online classrooms. Questions were designed to probe teacher’s readiness, instructional practices using technology, upskill themselves on ICT.

The questionnaire is divided into three parts –

Part 1: Teaching Learning Practice - This part aims at understanding teacher readiness for futuristic learning practices, teaching strategies, beliefs and practices


Part 3: Reflect - enabled teachers’ reflection on their learning and professional views – to presume post-Covid educational scenarios.

Findings and Observations

Part 1: Teaching Learning Practice
What's the role of textbooks in teaching-learning practice? Do teachers essentially use them as tools to cover or uncover syllabus keeping curriculum as the focus? In response to these questions 70% of respondents considered prescribed textbooks for academics as more of support and reference rather than indispensable tool. They do not feel textbooks to be customary in the process of teaching learning. This indicated that they acknowledge alternatives to textbook, with remarks on the need to improvise on them through reforms in syllabus that is currently exhaustive. Over all they seem to understand the subtle nuances of curriculum vs syllabus.

“Syllabus must be updated time to time as per the requirement and we do follow and implement the curriculum without any deviation.”
Some of the respondents proposed there be more variety which is application oriented and they seem to agree that syllabus:

- need modifications
- must be practical, and
- focusing on the quality of curriculum supercedes stipulation of completing syllabus

“The syllabus must be knowledge oriented along with language-built bridge, might be dynamic incorporating simple to complex components, the curriculum might incorporate portals for not just assessment of standards but application of concepts learnt beyond class room.”

“I feel that the curriculum should not be rigid, teachers should be given flexibility to adopt various innovative techniques to develop language skills among the learners.”

Classroom is a dynamic environment and when they are virtual the effectiveness demands various abilities on part of the teacher. An effective teacher adapts to changing needs and brings to practice inspired and innovative teaching strategies to achieve learning outcomes.

Q. State two of your best teaching techniques for ESL.

Q. What types of instruction technology do you use for teaching ESL?
   a projectors  b smart boards  c computers  d mobile

“Creating new technology and mass media utilization”

“Must be free and natural, from word to sentence! Negotiation/ interaction on some topic with a few key words, giving a task to focus on key words, jot down meanings of them through dictionary and framing some sentences with those key words, pictorial presentation is a support system, the conducting tasks like debates, JAM sessions, etc leg up learning to a drastic progress. Digital mode advances learning in great interest!”

Discussions and observations from responses about techniques of ESL, helped the researcher understand how teaching community groups helps them share best practices and implement novel methods in making their language classrooms interesting. Three respondents have been sharing techniques, ideas and experiences to integrate tech resources as much as possible. Some senior teachers started message groups for teachers, where simple digital collaboration ideas, audio recordings, worksheets that enable learning, are shared. Use of technology is prevalent with 90% respondents, projecting videos being the prominent mode. This confirms their readiness to Covid time and technology-based teaching-learning environments.

Q. During the process of your teaching/student learning, attention is given to the development & application of:
   (You may select more than one box)
   Knowledge/content  Language specific skills  Literacy skills  Communication skills  Creative skills  Thinking skills  Interpersonal skills  Cross-curricular links

   This question aimed at identifying where teachers focus lies during their teaching practice. Seven respondents being aware of learners learning styles, adopted different teaching techniques for ELT and brought variety to learning. Six, of them leaned towards interactive and activity-based learning environment. Seven, favoured alternate approaches viz. observation, reflection, peer assessments, real life situations - rather than traditional modes of assessing learner performance. Respondents felt the need for
active and experiential learning in the dynamic and ever-changing needs of 21st century learner. They felt this ensures:

→ learners’ creativity
→ better grasp on concepts
→ joy of learning
→ application to real life

Part 2: In and Off the Covid-19

Part 2 of the questionnaire, enquired upon teachers’ thoughts and beliefs during Covid times. Covid has left teaching fraternity dazed and unsure about future both in terms of financial security and academic readiness. They are perplexed on what 'normal' looks like. Despite the fact that versatile teachers are thoroughly enjoying the comfort of home and family and creatively enabling their online sessions, yet the truth is most teachers find faceless teaching quite herculean and also challenging their deep-rooted beliefs and practices.

Q. According to you what role does technology have in schools of the future?

“When I take online class, I am conscious of how I look and what I wear, because parents are around listening to my class”

“Technology definitely can aid in the teaching learning process but cannot replace the role of teacher.”

“Disciplining them is so difficult. How can I teach without them paying attention?”

Teachers are aware of drastic transformation of roles that are not limited to classroom anymore. While continuing to prepare and guide learners they also extend care and concern to learner’s well-being during these unprecedented times. They sought parent participation with the hope to balance the learning process amid the present challenges. Learners who are with the focus group of teachers are from middle school. Challenges associated even in a regular classroom scenario are many and the virtual classrooms only make the task difficult if not impossible. Many of the learners do not have access to smart phones.

Q. Two major changes you foresee, post-Covid - broadly in education, specifically in your line-of-work - ELT?

“E-learning and T-sat programmes”

“Technology advancement and development educationally for both educator and educand, specifically lot of practical learning more than rote learning through mere materials.”

Teachers were asked to respond to questions that shed light on challenges and opinions for classroom readiness during and post-Covid. Here, respondents in general have up worthy opinions to scale up skills, to improve teaching and learning in response to the current situations. They are committed to purpose, professional yet passionate and caring - towards learner's academic and emotional growth. Most importantly, the need of the hour - they understand ICMR guidelines and are conscious of safety measures required in teaching-learning scenario. Noteworthy is respondents engaging themselves in periodic learning - upskilling their academic abilities.

Q. What role can teachers play in times of pandemic?

“Teachers should be cautious and keep motivating themselves and they try how to overcome such situations.”
“Act as leaders instructing awareness regarding the prevalence of ailment, it's effect and precautions to be taken to keep oneself safe.”

“Teachers play a crucial role in educating the students and their parents about the pandemic”

Ten respondents are optimistic and do not question the role and importance of technology in education. They all agree that technology will play a pivotal role in the future of education. Though little or no method is available right now to deliver learning without media. Hence, it was obvious how helpless respondents are - they recommended learners to refer and get support from print media to further their learning and keeping themselves occupied during these times. Regardless of all these opinions and the fact that online learning seems to be the safest bet - one point that was certain is that - respondents will continue to play an important role in learning process be it as mentors, facilitators or moderators.

Part 3: Reflect
Tech-savvy teachers are needed in order “to direct e-learning activities in a way that enhances education” (Clarke, Maldenado, Zagarell, 2012). Eight, of the respondents are technically equipped and have been using multimedia, smart-boards and phones. Two, expressed technical challenges as they live in a remote area. All of them understand Apps and their uses. They use their knowledge and know-how to create a positive environment engaging learners and making learning enjoyable.

Q. How essential is technology for your teaching-learning process?

“Students get attracted if we use technology in our classrooms to make learning meaningful.”

“Indispensable I feel. Not just a support system but a great guide. It's a support not a substitute.”

“Nowadays its very necessary for a teacher to use technology because students are very fast and we need to upgrade ourselves.”

“It makes teaching learning process easy.”

“In Covid pandemic situation technology is the only tool to reach the students.”

“Aid to get additional information and also various techniques that can be used in the teaching learning process.”

Online teaching has surely been a quick and welcome adaptation as a stop-gap to ensure continuity in learning. The deficits and gaping inadequacies of this process both in readiness and effectiveness entail immediate action. Academic optimism is sure to be seen amongst 80% of the respondents based on their positive outlook to the situation, more so because of the opportunity they have now sans academic pressure. Learning and reflecting on their career and growth, opportunities and drawbacks, improving on them, thinking differently, looking ahead for new vistas post-Covid.

“Education is a potential avenue towards development whose role cannot be diminished or altered amidst any kind of disaster.”

“Always be ready for the changes that happen.”

Above responses to the question on ‘One line of inspiration on future of education’ allowed for hope-filled positive note for all teaching fraternity. A respondent spoke of education to be the way forward, with immense possibilities that no situation can downplay, that challenges are never spoilers - instead they make teachers who they truly are - opportunity seekers and true disaster managers. Online teaching is all
about communicating with and remaining connected to learners, helping them learn and express their feelings. This aptitude alone can ennable teaching-learning process and empowers learners to identify their abilities and discover possibilities.

Discussion
Over the last century teaching-fraternity at large mastered the art and science of education to certain expertise level. With that impetus they have started to appreciate, upskill and engage themselves into continuous learning. Just when we think it can't get any better, Covid challenged all beliefs and practices and hard-pressed into a sudden oblivion. It exposed the fragility of systems across the globe, altered our practices and challenged our existence. Policy makers are pushed to identify and establish new rules and standards to build a resilient education system in the long run.

2020 March, pushed us into the mostly unknown and unseen. Life came to a standstill; schools were shut down and even as we write this, we are struggling to understand the Online woes and dilemmas. The intensity of this situation has only increased manifold due to the scale and speed with which we were caught in this pandemic. Education system coped at best but the backlash was on the quality of its delivery. The efficacy of online education is definitely compromised. Teacher development in terms of skill enhancement is a prospect, but how far will it result in actual learning outcomes will be the big question. One hopeful observation amidst all this is how flexibly and swiftly the entire system is trying to change and adapt. Teachers are not shy to learn and project themselves via media, governments quickly reforming policies, society embracing every change complacently. These various points bring to light the fact that technology and education is not an easy way in or out. Online education brings along challenges that teachers cannot handle on their own. This requires specialised learning, readiness and understanding. Teacher education reforms are amongst the major changes that will usher the new era of learning.

Conclusion
There's no doubt in ascertaining that online teaching is the way forward and easily adapted alternative during Covid. Yet, this too shall pass, and that's for when we must also think. Our focus should be on the actual need of the hour - a blended, holistic approach to teaching-learning process. Wisdom and experience of learning that permeates through each generation, supercedes any and all freebies that are offered in the name of technology - Apps, Zoom classes, Virtual experiences – which will only be a support and definitely not an alternative. The Human Interface remains constant even in times of excesses of Artificial Intelligence. Human communication and social interactions can never be bargained or altered for, because they design a positive affirming experience, cultivate connections and empathy and foster relations.

This study brings out the nuances of online teaching-learning practices during Covid with focus on the teachers of state-run Model schools of Telangana. Listed below are few recommendations based on the observations and analysis of the study conducted.

→ Online session to be less interactive
→ Resources and support material in simple form of short audio and video lessons
→ Teachers as facilitators rather than knowledge sharers
→ AVs to be primarily - free-to-air via television and radio medium
→ AVs to focus on Concept Learning
→ AVs length not to exceed 15 minutes per concept
→ Online sessions for class 8 onwards
→ Each session not to exceed 3 hours a day with breaks
→ Parent/Adult supervision made mandatory
→ Regulatory on Apps that make AV aids on paid basis
→ Free and Open access to Teacher Resources
→ Wi-fi as a basic need to education

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