

Campus, Corridor and Cyberspace: The Institutional Dynamics of Online Education

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Abstract

The widespread reliance on online education during the pandemic has raised concerns from different stakeholders in the Indian higher education system (IHES). IHES comprises Institutes of Eminence, central universities, state universities, and affiliated colleges. Central universities have a responsibility of ensuring quality education along with maintaining regional and cultural diversity. However, newer central universities established in the 2010s are struggling with these negotiations due to the local political, social, and cultural climate. The physical space of campuses in higher educational institutions is indispensable when it comes to ensuring democratic values, social justice, and academic freedom. The physical interaction in these spaces nurtures a climate of discussion, debate, and dialogue, which is difficult to realize in online interactions.

The inequality and deprivation of learners in IHES has become grimmer than ever before due to the pandemic and the unprecedented shift to the online mode of education. The differential educational backgrounds and experiences of students who choose central universities not only shape the teaching-learning processes in these spaces, but the university's culture also shapes the imagination and experiences of students. The physical space of the university does not only train students for academic endeavors but also nurtures their political, social, and cultural consciousness. The classrooms and corridors offer time and space for learners to expand their worldviews. Besides this, the physical space also opens the larger world of social networks (social capital) and cultural engagements (cultural capital) through interactions via student unions, cafeterias, hostels, libraries, sports, etc. So, it becomes imperative to ask, how, during the pandemic, did online

interaction shape learners, and who had to credit time, space, and resources (physical and intellectual) from their lives to continue learning?

This paper is based on my experience of teaching and researching in one of the new central universities, the Central University of Himachal Pradesh (CUHP). It seeks to address the following questions: How do students hailing from local colleges perceive academic engagement in a Central university? How did students and teachers experience online interaction during the pandemic?

Keywords: Indian higher education system, online interaction, Central university, cultural capital, social capital, Covid-19

Introduction

Central Universities are regarded as premier institutions of higher learning and research, as well as instruments for mitigating socio-economic and educational backwardness of the region where they are located. Presently, Indian higher education comprises 46 central universities, 371 state public universities, and 304 state private universities (AISHE, 2019). In 2009, 12 central universities were established through the Act of Parliament in those states which did not have any Central university. Although central universities have the mandate to elevate the standards of education, they have become places for satisfying political motives and vested interests (Altbach, 1993). In the backdrop of these universities struggling to maintain good standards of education, the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent shift to online education deprived the students and faculty of the minimal support that they were receiving through physical interactions. This paper seeks to examine the challenges of teaching and learning in the Central University of Himachal Pradesh (CUHP), established in 2010, which is struggling with bare minimum infrastructural facilities. The university does not even have a permanent campus and is functioning out of four rented buildings located 25-50 kilometres from the administrative office.

Himachal Pradesh is a hill state with 89.97% of the population living in villages (Statistical Abstract, 2017-18). Although there is a rapid increase in enrollment, the quality of undergraduate education is dismal.

Higher educational institutions do not merely offer quality education but can also transform the worldviews of students. Most students at Central universities are first-generation entrants, who are disadvantaged as they do not have information about university life, e.g., selection of courses, study organization, and examination preparation (Mishra, 2020). As their parents cannot provide adequate support, social support offered by peers and teachers becomes indispensable. The experience, relationships, and information attained by students in the university plays a decisive role in shaping their career and personality.

This essay is based on the author's observations of students' educational backgrounds and their struggles, gathered over the past nine years as a faculty at CHUP's School of

Education. The essay also attempts to understand the void experienced by students during online education. Physical interactions in university spaces offer enormous resources to students who migrate from their villages to pursue higher education. Besides classroom interactions, the physical space of the university offers resources in the form of social and cultural capital to the students. Bourdieu (1966) points out that the more one interacts with people of different specialties and interests, the more one interacts with their cultural capital and multiplies the opportunities for accessing knowledge. University students with high social capital form better relationship with their teachers and other students (Koultra et al., 2020; Mato & Tsukasaki, 2019; Peng, 2019). Mishra (2020), in her recent study, argues that social networks, social capital, and social support play a significant role in retaining students from minority communities in higher education.

I am aware of my students' socio-economic and educational backgrounds which has helped me in constructing the narratives with respect to their online and offline experiences of higher education. The narrative may not merely depict the struggles of a single cohort of students of one university, but perhaps, provide an indication of the experience of all students who have had to adjust to online and offline classes during the pandemic.

Students' Pedagogic Experience

Every higher educational institution has unique characteristics informed by its geographical location, faculty composition, and students' background. Universities in small towns are significantly different from the universities functioning in big cities like Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata. CUHP, primarily caters to students from small villages and towns in Himachal Pradesh, who have graduated from local colleges with bare minimum facilities of library, reading materials, and culture of learning. When I enquired from my first-semester postgraduate students who graduated in history or political science, they were unaware of any standard book or even of a reputed scholar in these disciplines. Passing examinations through non-standard reading materials, with minimal interaction with teachers is common. Cultural factors influence the learning pattern of students (Vermunt et al., 2014). Undergraduate instruction in local colleges is heavily dependent on rote learning from sub-standard textbooks exclusively published for cracking exams. Many local colleges hardly have well-equipped libraries with reference books, textbooks, journals, and subscription to e-resources. Lectures and final exams based on reproduction of factual knowledge dominate the higher education system, therefore, students' learning patterns are in tune with this academic culture (Vermunt et al., 2014).

Thus, acquainting students with standard reading materials, including reference books, journals, and articles becomes a tall task. However, after attending classes in a Central university, their academic orientations gradually transform. They experience a significant shift in the pedagogic process. Course content is flexible and open-ended where textbooks are replaced with reference books and journal articles, monologue is replaced by dialogue, paper-pencil tests are supplemented by classroom presentations and term papers. Students

adapt to the new academic culture of the university by engaging in varied academic and extra-academic activities. However, this process was disrupted during the pandemic when education shifted to the online mode.

Online teaching-learning implies a certain kind of pedagogic content knowledge, mainly related to designing and organizing learning experiences with the help of digital technologies (Rapanta et al., 2020). During the second phase of the pandemic (October 2020-February 2021), classes for the new cohort were initiated through the online mode. Physical classroom interaction offers an opportunity for faculty and students to read gestures and expressions of others. Effective teaching demands consistent responses from students that are reflected in their facial expressions. In the virtual mode, students and faculty hardly knew each other, and the students weren't acquainted with the pedagogic culture of the university. The pedagogic process that I practice in the classroom is driven by students' queries and conversations, so the students have to actively participate. During online classes, students initially hesitated to speak, but gradually I made them respond by consistently invoking their responses. But it was a tough job, sometimes due to network problems and sometimes due to personality differences. Moreover, students' personal engagement in home chores and other household responsibilities affected their participation. Coming from humble farming backgrounds, students are often needed in farming and other household activities. Moreover, the availability of reading material was reduced, as CUHP did not offer remote login facility to the library, and students were unfamiliar in exploring scholarly work on the web, and couldn't buy reading materials due to financial constraints. However, the teachers have had to improvise, and through personal guidance, they motivated the students to explore scholarly work on the internet and discuss these readings during online discussions, to build a culture of sharing and reading.

The Missing Peer Group Culture

The vibrant engagement of young minds in higher education institutions forms a social milieu that motivates and inspires students towards mutual learning and engaging in academic activities. Interaction with peers can positively influence overall academic development, knowledge acquisition, analytical and problem-solving skills, and self-esteem of the learner (Kuh et al., 2006). Some students come with commitment and some face difficulty in expressing their views. Students face challenges in adjusting to a new pedagogic environment where English is the medium of instruction, and participation in classroom presentations is influenced by it to a large extent. A cordial relationship, usually facilitated by the physical classroom, not only encourages the students to learn but also to cope with their personal constraints of hesitation and fear. Interactions of students within the classroom and outside creates a conducive environment where students can share their views and problems without hesitation. Beattie and Thiele (2016) state that college students who interact with professors and peers about academic matters have better college outcomes. Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper (1999) highlight the importance of peer

support in improving the reception of course material and clarifying difficult concepts. In the online mode, peer interaction of the classroom got diffused as they could not read each other's faces, which often elicit responses. Individual differences with respect to personalities significantly shape the dynamics of communication in online classrooms. I have observed the individual differences that affect classroom conversations. Students who were vocal in online classes remained silent in offline class and vice-versa. Moreover, some who face language barriers are more relaxed in the offline class as they can read the face of the teacher and feel comfortable in expressing in their mother tongue. Additionally, the personal engagement of students and passivity (sleepiness, inertness, and inattentiveness) often distort the communication process during online classes.

The Culture Of Discourse

Academic engagement is strengthened by the culture of discourse in which students speak, listen, construct, and tolerate diverse viewpoints. The academic discourse is informed by scholarly reading, thus it is different from idea exchanges that take place among people in general. Students read, comprehend, and discuss their thoughts in the classroom and this motivates them to read more and explore the world of ideas and knowledge. This forms the core of academic engagement in higher education. Students get excited and inspired when they clarify their doubts from other students, or when their views get space in classroom discussions.

In a virtual classroom, this opportunity is significantly restrained. Network problems and other difficulties in the online mode hamper the open interaction among students and teachers. The culture of dialogue and discourse is severely impinged upon. To maintain smooth connectivity during online classes, audio and video of the students are turned off, thus teaching seems like a conversation with a black wall. Mishra (2020) states in his study that students responded negatively when asked if online classes help them to understand conceptual knowledge and academic discourse sufficiently, and they confessed that they were unable to maintain the pace of their learning behaviour or cope with the teachers' speed (Mishra, 2020). Students rightly pointed out that teachers should create an environment for discussion and dialogue by assigning problems to students and eliciting a discussion around that problem.

The Imaginary Of Teacher

Lecturing is the dominating pedagogic practice at the undergraduate level in colleges and universities across India. Students rarely have personal interaction with teachers nor do the teachers have time to address students' concerns. The shift to online mode has distorted even this interaction. While speaking to first-semester postgraduate students enrolled in 2021, they mentioned to me that they hardly had any online classes during their undergraduate studies. Students were confined to their villages during the online classes

with poor internet connectivity and no access to the library. Students had no interaction with their teachers. Personal interaction with the teachers on the one hand motivates students, and on the other hand, it facilitates the teachers to better understand the background of the student, which further assists teachers in selecting their reading materials and simplifying classroom conversations. During the online mode, personal interaction among teachers and students is restrained, and students hesitate to communicate with the teacher. Doubts and misconception are aggravated as the online mode does not give enough space and time for non-formal communication outside the classroom. Besides domain knowledge, proficient computer knowledge, communication skills, and clarity of expression, it has been found that teachers' personal qualities like emotional connection with the students and the ability to resolve small issues during and after the online classes are key determinants for effective teaching. Rapanta and others have identified three distinctive presence of teachers during online instruction. They are cognitive presence, social presence, and facilitatory presence. While cognitive and facilitatory presence points to teachers' understanding of students' preparedness for learning and the availability of digital tools, social presence demands social communication channels that teachers must open to maintain and possibly enhance the lost spontaneous student-student and student-teacher interaction (Rapanta et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Newly-founded central universities have to address the varied educational experiences of the students. However, students' academic exposure in the university brings a significant shift in their worldview. Formal and informal interaction with teachers and peers in the physical space of the university plays a vital role in students' academic progression. However, during the pandemic an unexpected shift to the online mode significantly hampered this process. The physical space of university offers immense resources in the form of social capital (relationship with peers and teachers) and cultural capital (academic and cultural activities, reading material, library and campus space) to students, and helps in overcoming the information and resource limitations that they experience at their homes. The virtual world has undoubtedly erupted information resources, but consistent guidance and mentoring from teachers is irreplaceable under any circumstance ♦

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