# Notes from the Field During Covid-19

**Mr Vinod. R**

Can the truth be spoken about mourning of pedagogy in classrooms? Are we performing with resilience despite the collapse within?

As a teacher of psycho-social courses exploring identity, childhood, and self at Ambedkar University, I will be presenting some ruminations from my experience of teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic, through this essay. Furthermore, my previous experience of teaching courses in the fields of education and psychology in offline mode acts as the foundation of my memory and nostalgia, from where I derive a sense of mourning in pedagogy in online mode.

I will not be sharing any specific experiences, events, or moments from online teaching as I believe that there are shared ethics of the classroom as a community, where each member contributes to making it a safe space for sharing, listening, empathizing, as well as disagreeing. So, what will I be discussing in the rest of the paper? I will be reflecting on some of the questions that as a teacher, I have had to grapple with due to the online mode of teaching. I am going to share some fragments of angst with a nascent wish to mourn to arrive at some elements of resilience and hope in this dystopian conversation.

While navigating through Covid-19 and online classes, as well as articulating the phenomenological experiences of online education, many thoughts zone into the realm of inequity, productivity, surveillance, control, accountability, care, coping, surviving, and living. Even though the virtual classroom does provide a structure and routine to teachers' and students' lives, amid the fear and anxiety of infection it also becomes a potential site of hyper-productivity as a way of denial against the reality of the impact of the pandemic.

Initially, most postgraduate programs responded to the crisis in different ways. One way of coping began with the use of multiple choice questions, question banks, and centralization of third-party institutions conducting the exams, where the university is not directly responsible for any spread of infection and is not accountable to students. As we refused to acknowledge the psycho-social challenges faced by the society during the pandemic, we kept working, thinking it to be a necessary way of surviving and performing care, despite feeling drained from within. I was teaching courses on experiencing the Self and Childhood, and Identity and Society for an M.A. psychology program, yet the lack of a mourning space became a silent sigh in the paradigm of efficient delivery of content and evaluation. The ritual of this normalcy concealed the trials, tribulations, and the vicissitudes of self of the teacher in mapping the losses, fragmentation, and the void. It reflected the resilience of breaking into pieces without falling apart.

The themes of the language of experience around this mourning reflect the loss of agency and community due to centralization of power and authority. This makes me wonder if some humans have become the virus we are fighting against, and have homes been colonized as workplaces in the name of compassionate outreach. Can these moments during the pandemic help us reflect its dystopian contents in the name of education? Transformation of classrooms from real to virtual, and its relationship to quality of education, the psychic death of relationships and notions of dialogue and democracy in the gendered nature of environment, space, time, and being have always been a potential site of silent mourning.

This, then, makes us ask other significant questions like, have we become teachers of the open classroom of the world? Are teachers content creators, delivery agents or copyright negotiators? What is the vision of the source of faceless questions, faceless responses, and content completion in online classrooms?

What can be taught when there is an epidemic, death, and collapse of the community in the name of the virtual? What is memorable in the experience of teaching and feedback without bodies being present? Can the truth be told of the narcissism and self-centeredness in relationships, the poverty of content in objective questions and answers, and the endless hours of time spent on feedback despite it remaining a collection of fleeting moments? Do we fear this regime as this has the potential to reduce us to non-beings?

It is in this backdrop of agency, potential, collapse, and humility that I wish to seek fellow travelers for a conversation around the myth of knowledge and certainty; and wish that we actually begin to care and listen to each other during this pandemic.

Some reflections that I would like to make are on pedagogy and its limits with regards to information and communication technologies (ICT). Online education, and its oppressive and simultaneously liberating potential, creates a sense of utopia despite its dystopian characteristics vis-a-vis democracy and inclusion. When 'T' of the term ICT drives the utopia of the nation, do we then exclude art, culture, history, and social hierarchies and its negation, basically knowledge itself, and focus entirely on information? Should we exclude the real community from the term 'C' and reduce it to communication, while focusing exclusively on the term technology as the panacea for all social inequality and injustice?

Can the poor design and control ICT networks rather than be mere recipients of information? Does it essentially mean that every communication will be a top-down centralized paradigm creating digital divides, access divide, skills and capacity divides, and therefore, eliciting developmental divide?

If global is the new local, then who actually gains in the name of efficiency? Development will be colonized by private companies like, Google, BYJU'S, Microsoft, Intel through their IoT (internet of things), machine learning, quantum computing and various programs. Are we going to go completely virtual right from field experiences, internships, community visit to villages, and be a community that merely delivers and shares information rather than being co-creators of knowledge?

Will teachers be reduced to consultants or gig workers, and students to consumers? Will private-public partnership finally be reduced to private partnership (the core of the ICT philosophy)?

Will education be reduced to information packets that need to be delivered, and teachers be reduced to deliverers? How do we envision the laws of the nation and apply them to the cyber world, which is hosted on the World Wide Web? Will there be a crisis of governance and will new norms be created for democracy, equality, dignity and solidarity? What will happen to the social values of universities; if profit, ranking, and accreditation in the global market become the new social ideals?

The themes that are worth examining in pedagogies are when teachers and teaching is not imagined as co-creation but as purely deliverers of content based on blooms taxonomy of quantitative and qualitative, cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains. If teachers are only envisioned as deliverers rather than curriculum developers and practitioners, this entrenchment in simultaneity of oppression and liberation, creation and reception, becomes a myopic insight to progress and transformation.

In the landscape of cyber control, if surveillance is understood as quality, then what happens to the agency of the teachers and students, and the space for teacher and student collectives? If all social protests become electromagnetic signals replacing human bodies and interactions, will we from this online worldview then, celebrate happy independence?

If the agency of teachers is reduced to a machine language and productivity determined by the 'likes' and number of students enrolled, will it finally lead to invisibilizing the teachers, their history, and struggles in the classroom?

If the seduction of the artificial intelligence worldview is going to be successful, who will address the ethnic biases, widening inequities, power consumption, global warming and the environmental dystopia it will usher? Who will address the vision of the digital along with aims of education and its relationship with equity, access and quality?

The past two years since the outbreak of Covid-19 have given us a glimpse into the nature of students' attention span, attendance, type of learning possible, death of wonder and

slowness in imagination. Have teachers in higher education felt the need to distribute ration, take family members of students affected by Covid-19 to hospitals or stay with the lowest common denominator of students who don't have access to these resources and stay with the loss which has been the reality in many schools? We love averages and efficiency so much that we dream of infinite possibilities and never mourn the limits of the dream. Can the best lesson plan and design of integrated computer systems replace teachers and stop investments in quality teacher education programs?

Do we hold on to our dreams of pedagogy and social imagination as an act of adaptation, or do we dwell on what this speed of efficiency and transformation refuses to acknowledge regarding our being, identity, and relationship with others as fellow teachers? I am wondering how do we sustain authenticity in conversations and relationships involving teaching and learning when parallel universes of games and social media share the same window of the classroom space. How can disclosures of identities that are still in the making find an expression in a caring and trusting environment in the online mode? How can we analyze and reflect upon the non-participation of students? How do we arrive at a meaningful relationship with knowledge and sustain students' curiosity? How do we settle in so many multiplicities in asking the question "who am I, and where am I going"?

Let's collectively look at moments when there is silence after the question in the online format of the classroom in disciplines like psychology, sociology, history, literature, and performance studies. We love our image and the narcissism of integration so much that we refuse its disintegration in front of us. This delay in answer seems so empowering for the student. Can this silence enable us to hear our dread, and if so, why do we not hear them in the use of technology?

I wish that the very mode of communication to students this way can be stopped and I am able to meet face-to-face over a cup of tea to share our silence. If we can have a retreat on this note in a space far away from the institution as teacher's community where there is potential space to transgress and be human. It has been my desire to share, how this duality of exploitation and progress, this impatience to wait, to listen, to care, the myth of knowingness, the desire for power, and innocence to be always useful and relevant despite the insignificance, marks the teacher's community.

Does that mean we would essentially conform and surrender than be spontaneous and free? Will we always live with the relationships with having, receiving, hoarding, and marketing mode with all its meta-pathologies? Will we ever learn the language of love and relate to community of all species through this model? Will we learn to respect our bodies and care for ourselves and others in this world through this presentation?

Despite all these questions, mourning, grief, and the pandemic, how do we still teach and speak the truth about the lack of care and health, that this mode of teaching and being is making inevitable. I believe that it is only through this mourning that there is a slight potential to take in the world and the words that we slowly want to dream as we dread its collapse ◆