Impact of Social Sciences Blog: If university campuses close, can everyone learn from home? What happens when the home becomes the classroom in India
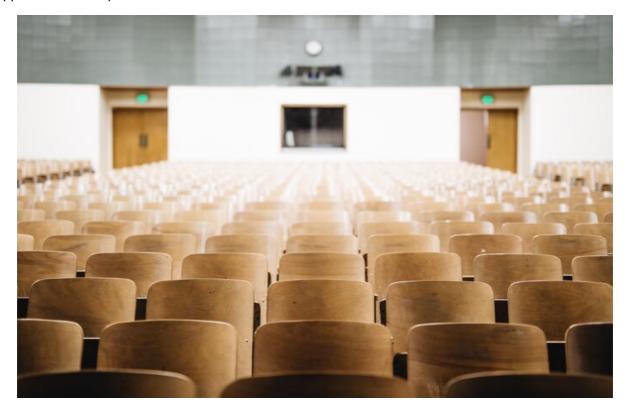
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If university campuses close, can everyone learn from home? What happens when the home becomes the classroom in India

*The reorganisation of work lives bought about by the pandemic has also been met with a reorganisation of domestic space as the site where work now takes place. For Higher Education, this means that homes have now become classrooms. However, the fundamental premise of successful online education is the access to both electricity supply and an Internet connection which are not universally available in India. Drawing on findings from an ongoing qualitative study, **Pawan Singh** outlines four key ways in which the pandemic has reconfigured Higher Education in India.*

The COVID-19 global crisis has been a taskmaster with many lessons. In India, an abruptly announced lockdown sent most economic activity home leading to a chaotic reorganization of the domestic space. As the 'work-from-home' imperative liberated public space from the stresses of human activity, the space of the home became a contested site of blurred boundaries between professional and personal lives. Indian university professors and lecturers found themselves in this predicament as they resumed classes online after a brief hiatus caused by the lockdown. Video conferencing digital services such as Zoom and Google Meet replaced the physical congregation of students in the university classroom from April 2020 onwards.

With plans underway to reopen university campuses with the possibility of going back to online classes in the likely event of another outbreak, it is instructive to understand how the experience of teaching and learning has been for professors and students. Based on an ongoing qualitative study concerning the pandemic reconfiguration of the university classroom, this post presents four key considerations based on in-depth interviews with professors and students. The Indian case presents a unique perspective from a developing context, one in which social relations, technological affordance and socioeconomic inequality intersect to illuminate the extent to which the digital medium can supplant real-life experience.

How does the online pivot change the nature of teaching and learning?

1.Domestic space and time: The transition to online teaching in the early days happened as if digital technologies were being primed for the exceptional event of a pandemic. As [online teaching became the buzz in the early days of the lockdown](#), the switch to digital seemed like a foregone conclusion brimming with possibilities. Easily overlooked in this primacy of the digital is the [social situatedness of digital technologies](#), the material context of the Indian household in which they became positioned to ensure the continuity of the classroom. Some professors, while glad to avoid the long commute to campus, found themselves negotiating the demands of housework entailing supervision of domestic help and elderly caregiving duties. Domestic labour competed with professional effort as the familiarity of the home space became disorienting. The liveliness of the digital at times superseded offline life waiting for its turn.

2.Privacy: Both, the video conferencing platforms and the domestic space of the home, raised privacy concerns for the professors. As [the Indian Government flagged cyberattack issues with Zoom](#) declaring it unsafe for public use, professors also had to deal with cooking noises from the kitchen, people walking in and out of the room at any time and young children demanding attention. How should they prioritize privacy in online teaching? Should they worry about data breaches and cyberattacks or forge past the interruptions at home to go on lecturing? The contested nature of the home space with its unregulated interruptions is perhaps a timely reminder that the online medium can ensure continuity but not seamlessness.

3.Digital labour: For most professors, online teaching was no match for the physical environment of the classroom that afforded simple gestures like maintaining eye contact and being co-present to enrich the experience of lecturing. The digital medium allowed connection across boundaries yet constrained meaningful interaction through the often turned-off screen camera behind which student presence was not guaranteed. To appear professional on camera, the professors felt they had to dress nicely and try to simulate a scholastic environment at home. They often felt vulnerable appearing on camera in their home space where they would normally be relaxed. The anxiety of not being able to look back at students, who often had their cameras off, made them feel further exposed. Compelled to modulate their speech volume to ensure they were being heard, lecture delivery through the digital medium was not always comforted by student attention.

4.Infrastructures and Networks – India is known [globally for its technological innovation and digital economy](#) and [rising number of Internet users](#) expected to reach a billion by 2025. Yet, only [25 percent of homes in urban India and 15 percent in rural parts have a stable Internet connection](#). The stark reality of Internet infrastructure and access to high-end devices that ensure a fulfilling learning experience severely limits the digital potential. Consider also [the use of mobile hotspots and dongles in addition to a broadband connection](#) all of which come with poor connectivity issues. Even more basic a need than the Internet connection is electricity supply, which further widens the digital divide in India. Despite a [near-universal electrification of Indian homes under the Saubhagya Scheme](#) (Good Fortune Scheme), the [quality and regularity of supply has been reported to be abysmal](#) in rural parts of the country.

Who can learn from home?

The fundamental premise of successful online education is the access to both electricity supply and an Internet connection without which we have a bleak picture of privileged haves and underprivileged haves of digital technology. Access to reliable infrastructures shapes not just how well a student is able to learn in exceptional times but also levels of motivation, enthusiasm for learning and the optimism about a bright future earned through higher education. Another consideration in this transition to the online mode is that of [college tuition fees and whether Indian students are entitled to a subsidized rate](#) since the cost of running an education institution online goes down.

Despite the digital promise of inclusivity and [access to the Internet becoming a fundamental right in India in 2020](#), the new space of education opened up by the digital, at the end of the day, remains constrained by its geographical context. The social situatedness of the digital in an Indian home – a space structured by familial obligations and shared resources – reiterates the irreplaceability of the physical context of learning in the university classroom. The professors in our study expressed a strong preference for return to the university but maintained a pragmatic view of likely institutional directives to stay online as part of the preparedness for an uncertain future.

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This post drew upon research conducted by UX Whale, a multidisciplinary research collected based in New Delhi.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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