What Coronavirus Outbreak Means For Global Higher Education

What will it mean for teaching and learning 'in a world of Corona'? The solution that most people around the world are seeing as the default and safest option is technological - online teaching, writes Mousumi Mukherjee.

Mousumi Mukherjee 29 March 2020

Image used for representational purpose only.

"Respect the Virus. Learn to live in a World of Corona. It's going to be the new reality for everybody. When there will be a vaccine, probably 18 months from now, we can reassess"-- Dr David Navarro, WHO Special Envoy for COVID-19.

We are living in extraordinary times. The world around us has radically transformed within the past couple of weeks and months into a science-fiction movie. But, it is no extra-terrestrial alien afflicting our lives and livelihood on planet Earth. It is Coronavirus - a virus, which is our own creation in the age of "Anthropocene".

WHO special envoy has urged us to "respect the virus" and "learn to live in a World of Corona". But, as an educator and education researcher, I am wondering what will it mean for all of us to "respect the virus" and "live in a world of Corona"? What will it mean for teaching and learning "in a world of Corona"? The solution that most people around the world are seeing as the default and safest option is technological - online teaching.

Most engineering, technical and management institutes, as well as many private educational institutions in India, have been quick to transition to online teaching and learning. But, what are the real challenges of online teaching and learning? Few people have the answer to this important question, because few have experience with fully online teaching and learning, even in the most technologically developed world.

Research on online teaching and learning is inconclusive so far, just as research on Coronavirus. Little research has assessed the effects of online classes on elementary to high school students. Also, in comparison to on-campus classes, online classes are not seen as very effective for school-age students.

However, school education is the feeder to higher education. Hence, there is a huge challenge ahead, as well as room for innovation. But, global education experts have warned already about the aggressive marketing of commercial Ed-tech companies, particularly in the US seeking to sell their products in the middle of COVID-19 crisis. The experts have emphasized that even while using the best Ed-tech solution, we need to pay attention to the vital relationship between technology, teacher and the students. Even in this time of "social distancing", we cannot forget the fact that education is not just a cognitive process. It is also a social process.

As teachers, the way we form these relationships with our students online and the way we facilitate our students to form these relationships with their peers online will be key to the success of any kind of online teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning online is somewhat more successful in higher educational contexts. But, compared to the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS), a blended-model of online (asynchronous) teaching and learning utilizing LMS platforms (such as blackboard or moodle) and, on-campus (synchronous) classroom interactions are more effective.

Now with the COVID-19 crisis, faculty even in the most technologically developed education systems are struggling to transition to fully-online courses. I am hearing from faculty colleagues in the US that, though they had set-up online LMS platforms for their on-campus courses at the beginning of the semester, it is taking a huge amount of time and work to make their course fully online using synchronous online platforms, such as zoom. The global health crisis has exacerbated many other challenges in the society and economy. A purely technological solution to deal with the global public health and related challenges is probably not enough.

As I write this article, racist attacks are being faced by East Asian and South-East Asian students in many western countries, while similar racist attacks are being faced by North-East Indian students and, those who look Chinese are being called as "China-virus" in India.

When we have failed to build respectful and inclusive on-campus teaching and learning environments to build inclusive societies, how can we do it online? We are being called to "respect the virus" and "learn to live with it". But, can we do it without learning to respect ourselves and others? Can we practice physical distancing and build social solidarities online with all colleagues and our students, irrespective of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and racial background?

The transition from on-campus to online teaching and learning is not easy. It was a huge learning curve for me personally15 years ago, when I had to first plunge into online teaching, as part of the blended learning model then evolving in some US college campuses. Even though I had five years' prior teaching experience at a top college under Calcutta University, it was not an easy transition.

Since I was then in the US as part of a Fulbright teacher's training programme, I had to take some courses myself in graduate school as a student-teacher. I had to also learn to teach undergrad students utilizing a blended-model of on-campus and online pedagogy. I had the opportunity to observe and learn the system, both as a student and as a teacher.

American students from privileged backgrounds were more used to taking exams and assignments online and typing on their laptop computers. The socio-economically disadvantaged students there and some international students without personal computers and internet at home would work at the campus library till the wee hours of the morning to complete their online assignments. I wonder what will such students do now- in the US, in India and larger global context!

Faculty needed lot of support and help from digital instructional designers and campus IT experts to master using the online learning management systems (LMS), which was being used even for on-campus teaching, as part of the blended learning pedagogy for the digital native undergrad students, to share course content, assignments and to set up online discussion boards before social media platforms arrived.

In the graduate school (postgraduate studies) the scenario was quite different for on-campus courses. Few teachers were required to set-up their teaching modules on the LMS platform before the semester courses began.

The scenario started changing slowly for undergrads with the arrival of social media. During "Focus on Teaching" workshop for teachers, alongside the official LMS platform, teachers would be also encouraged to use social media platforms to engage with undergrad students.

Fully online courses were offered mostly for mature professionals. Teachers, lawyers, managers, consultants etc., would take these online courses in the evening and enrol in online degree programmes for career advancement. Though a practical component was always required as part of the experiential learning pedagogy followed by the mainstream American system. I wonder how this actual field experience component will be fulfilled under the COVID-19 crisis now!

Modern Indian universities have been historically more theoretical because of its colonial legacy. Now with the online transition, we need to think seriously how we can deal with the practical component of teaching and learning to prepare respectful professionals for the"world of Corona".

Moreover, uninterrupted power and internet supply will pose a challenge for online education. As I write this article on my laptop, sitting inside my current university campus residence under national lockdown due to the COVID-19 crisis, my writing work has halted four times due to power-cuts.

If we have to run online classes in full-swing for the rest of the academic year in the context of COVID-19 with social distancing as the new norm, all students and faculty will need access to a personal computer, uninterrupted power and internet supply. This is a huge challenge in a large populous country like India and even in some of the more economically developed countries where I have lived, such as the US and Australia.

From personal experience of teaching and learning online, I know that even the most tech-savvy faculty needs a good deal of hand-holding by trained instructional designers to offer their courses online and to learn the learning management systems- both synchronous and asynchronous platforms.

I wonder how this hand-holding will be literally possible now, where social-distancing is the norm! In India, it would be also hard to find well-trained professionals in digital instructional design. Faculty will need to be proactive in viewing online tutorials and seeking consultation from colleagues, who have had past experience with online teaching and learning abroad.

The official national lock-down time could be utilized by teachers to up-scale their skills to teach online, even as they struggle with their own children at home, safety concerns and try to procure home essentials for survival.

It will take a huge amount of public and private sector investment (both time and money) in the middle of the health crisis to also tackle the educational crisis looming large in front of us, as a side-effect of the health crisis.

Future will prove whether humanity and science will be victorious again or not. In the meantime, we will have to "respect the virus" and learn to teach online the future citizens of this "world of

Corona", so that they don't make the same mistakes that we have made because of our total disrespect of "other" humans, "other" species and above all, mother nature!

(Dr. Mousumi Mukherjee is Associate Professor & Deputy Director, International Institute for Higher Education Research & Capacity Building (IIHEd), OP Jindal Global University. Views expressed are personal.)