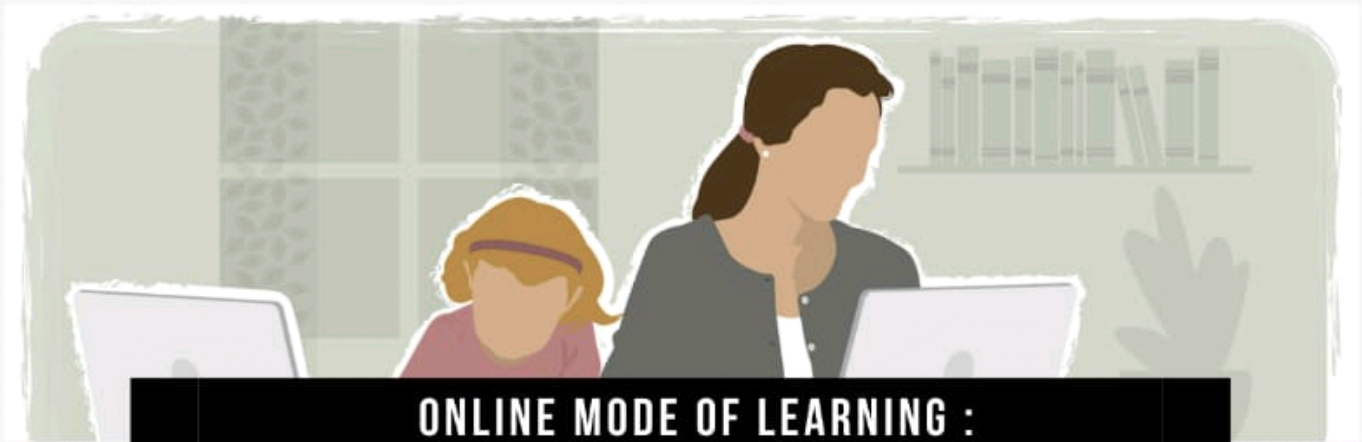




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The ELA Newsletter





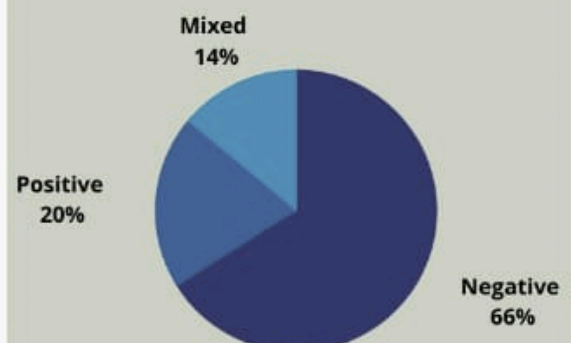
ONLINE MODE OF LEARNING : WHAT DO THE STUDENTS THINK

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university's decision to continue education in the online mode has been met with mixed reactions. While it helped the students save their college year from going to a waste, the students continue to suffer from the physical and mental consequences which followed the shift.

Priya, in her third year of pursuing English Honours, calls the overall experience "abysmal" and continues by saying, "the online mode strips learning of all enjoyment and human connection. There is no joy or semblance of human emotions in this automated learning mode. It feels like we are devouring mind numbing facts instead of learning and savouring knowledge." Essentially, the joy out of learning that one feels is lost; learning has been reduced to memorising information and not engaging with it.

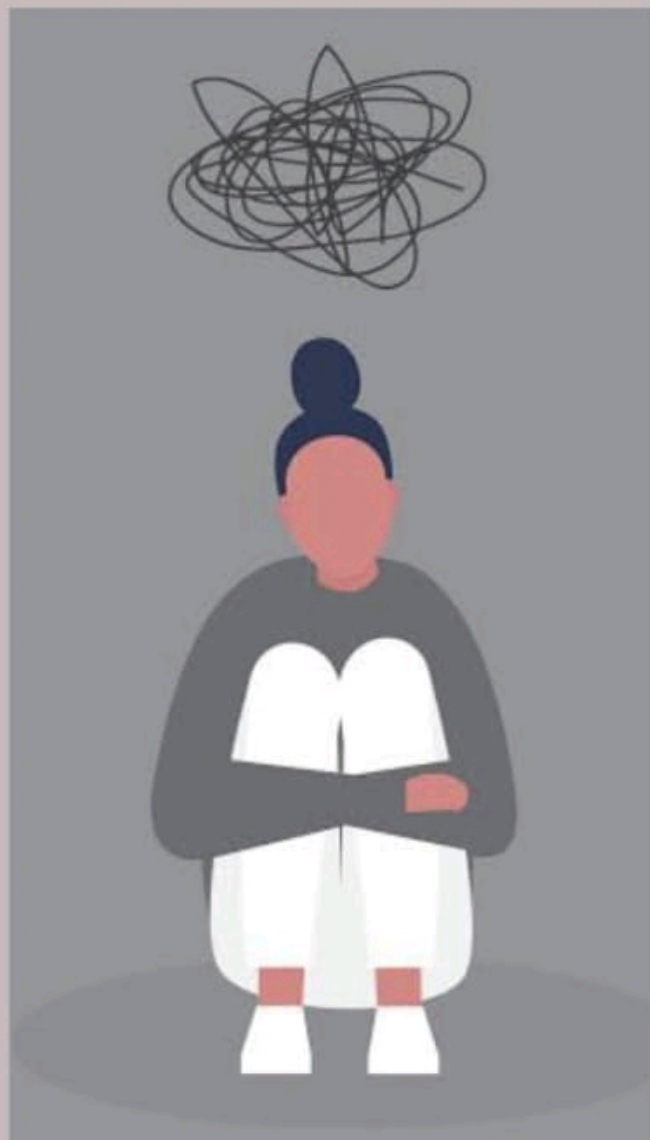
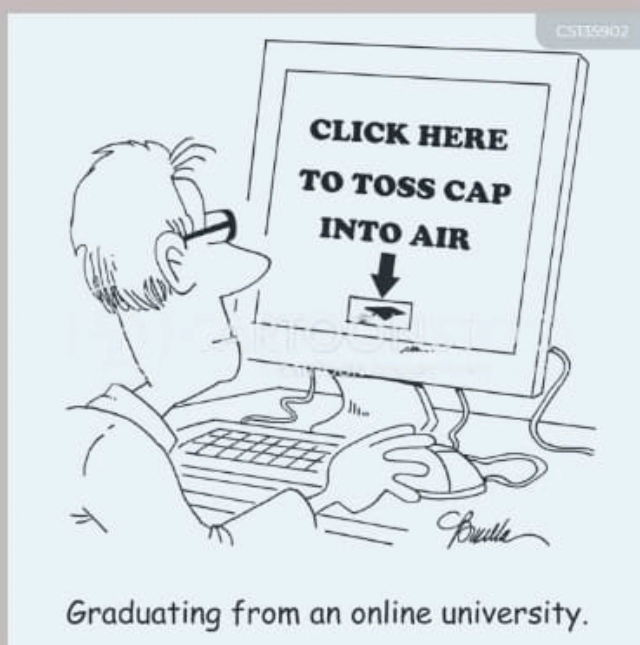
AddThe losses that the students of Sciences have felt with the online mode are just as heavy, if not more. The practical application of their studies is entirely lost; the only aspect they have access to and control on is theory. This continually affects their practical performance and the ability to apply what they have learnt to their surroundings. One of the many consequences of an absence of a practical-based education is not having a firm grasp on theory which the students complain about. Himanshi, pursuing their second year in Statistics Honours, mentions how they got "zero knowledge, zero understanding of the course" and that they need to "refer to YouTube for studies".

In a survey conducted by the English Literary Association of Sri Venkateswara College, about sixty-six per cent of the respondents reported a negative experience with the online mode of learning, while about fourteen per cent of the respondents reported having mixed feelings about it.



While the effects of the switch to the online mode are rarely visible to the human eye, they continue to devastate the mental health of the students. Numerous students complain of physical and mental fatigue, and having to socially distance during the pandemic adds to the loneliness, disconnect, and isolation they feel with the mode. Students who have trouble catching up with classes feel additional stress and obsess over the classes they have missed. Additionally, the online mode is reported to have increased the students' anxiety and has affected their participation in class. The important conversations around which their graduation revolves become their professors' monologues. They feel estranged from their professors and the honest, friendly teacher-student relationship is lost.

The students who have had the misfortune of being initiated into their college years online mention how the friendships they have cultivated feel empty since their bond has been solely based on their online persona. In this regard, Yashita Jain, pursuing their second year in English Honours, says, "As human beings, we all need some social connections and a sense of belonging.



With broken links from the school friends and not being able to connect with the college friends, I feel very lonely and struggle to really identify with anyone." This has continually contributed to their loneliness, amongst other things. The students who manage to make it to Delhi University are filled with hopes about enjoying three or four years of their lives to the fullest, but they fail to receive adequate, well-deserved, and much-needed attention and encouragement from their professors and seniors. After the daunting experience of making it to Delhi University, their experience (and, in their eyes, the biggest achievement of their lives yet) continues to be underwhelming and uncelebrated.



"I was working on my online degree, until my computer went on sabbatical."

The (limited) inclusivity that Delhi University boasts about has been lost with the online mode. Only the students who have an access to the fastest, unlimited internet connection can keep up with their studies (and constantly have access to extra material beyond classes). Students hailing from small towns, villages (where continuous electricity availability is a problem), or even cities ravaged by the monsoon have no choice but to skip classes. While the decision to not include attendance in the online mode of education is welcomed, it does not account for the fact that most students who skip classes do not miss them voluntarily but out of helplessness. Physical mode of learning enables participation from all sorts of communities, but in the online mode, the participation is vastly reduced to the people safe from all the limitations—not just of the virus but also of an unsteady internet connection.

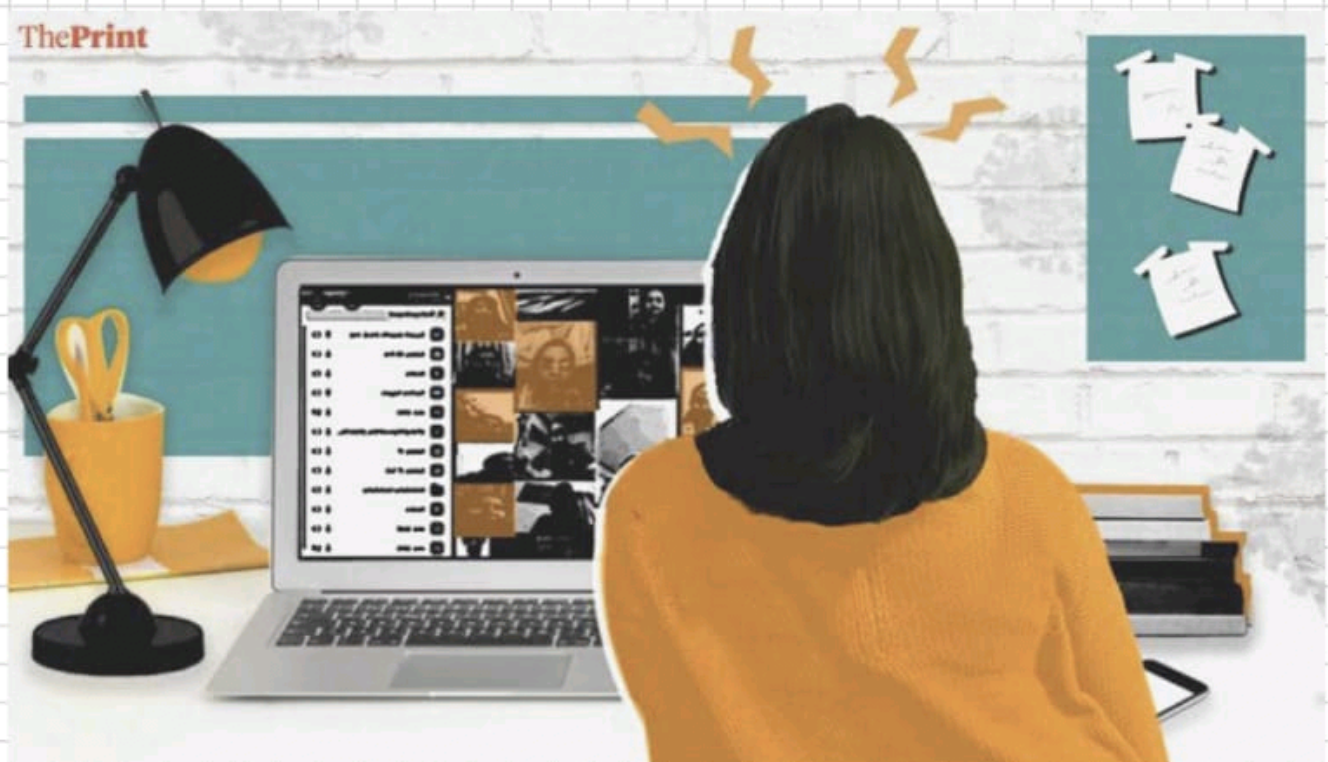
It is a foolish and a baseless presumption that all students hail from a privileged background with a perfect internet connection, adequate knowledge of technology, top-notch devices, a supportive and/or a healthy family, and a soundproof, sturdy housing. The online mode of learning has made us realise that students with all access to the aforementioned aspects are but a privileged minority. The rest of the majority not having either few of or all of prerequisites that an individual needs for their education continue to neglect their education, willingly or unwillingly. Can we call this mode of learning "education" at all? What is it then, if not a test for exclusivity, and physical, financial, mental and technological ability; a mode that encourages gatekeeping a basic human need?

Parinita, in their second year of studying in English Honours, calls the experience a "paradox" because "...despite having a comfortable bed to sleep on, most nights I remain wide awake; despite having every facility at hand, most days are spent in frustration of power cuts, lost connections (both internet and social); despite having all the air while people on hospital beds are gasping for it, I still find myself suffocated—not because of a disease that has made itself at home but because of these walls that close in on me even on the happiest days." This is coupled with the elders' pressures (to perform well, perfect their professional record, participate in co-curricular activities, chore, amongst other things) and reminders to do their best, for we cannot "waste away these years". A student is bound to reach their breaking point much earlier than they ever should or deserve to.



Students continue to complain about the physical side-effects of attending online classes from morning to evening. They mention how online mode of learning causes irreparable damage to their eyes and how classes in rapid succession do not permit them a break, causing postural problems as well. The online mode has also reduced physical activity in students by a large margin. Alisha, pursuing her third year of English Honours, writes how

However, a minority of the students (twenty per cent) feel that the positives outweigh the negatives. Simrath Kaur from second year of Sociology Honours describes their experience as "quite good" and also raises their concern for the third wave. They say, "There will be a chance of a third wave rise in coming months. As students come from different states of India, they will definitely face the problem of travelling to Delhi. If COVID cases rise again, there will be a panic



"sitting in front of a screen, from early mornings to late evenings, has resulted in a persistent headache that severely impacts my comprehension of the material being taught."

Even if one can ignore all the mental and physical ill-effects that have accompanied this mode, one cannot ignore the people who unfortunately contract/contracted the novel Coronavirus. The people who suffered—and continue to suffer—include/include students as well, especially during the infamous second wave. It is absolutely inhumane to expect students to stay on top of their classes while they suffer the debilitating symptoms of the virus and practice strict isolation.

among the students, who will return again to their hometown. Thus, online mode is the better option than offline mode." Khezran, in their second year of English Honours, calls the experience "bittersweet" and writes how they have been "able to save up a lot of [their] time and have invested the same in various co-curricular activities and personality-developing internships".

Moreover, students who underperform in the physical mode of education due to social anxiety and/or shyness think this mode of education is a boon and boosts their learning. Khyati, in their second year of English Honours, says, "It has been a joyous ride for me, I don't get any panic or anxiety attacks that I usually got before going to school. I can be me and moreover, I don't feel any pressure of attending classes. Because of the online classes I have the luxury to leave the class if I feel overwhelmed at any point of time."



Whom can we blame for this overall devastating switch? Perhaps we can point to the policy-makers who deemed this mode of learning as ideal, convenient, and continue to promote this very-alienating mode as the perfect substitute. The healthcare system of the country continues to remain ill-equipped to handle the COVID-19 patients; the discourse on seeking help to undo the irreparable damages done to the mental health of the citizens seems far-fetched. The public continues to remain divided on the online mode of education solely due to the negligence of the and illbad policy-enforcing which has put students in a dilemma on whether to choose between holistic education or saving their lives. Is it not too late to play the blame game, when irreversible damage has been already done? Is the normalisation of the digital ethical?

The apathy of the administration, the people in power, the policy-, and the decision-makers, is appalling at best and inhumane at worst. Expecting students to not only pursue their degree with diligence, honesty, but also sit for exams is ignorant and speaks volumes of their distance from the ground reality of the inadequate infrastructure. Our priorities are not in the right place: our focus should be ensuring the safety of our citizens first, providing adequate infrastructure to battle COVID-19 second, providing educational equipment to the youth and the children third, and so on, but we only focus on the convenience and the ability of the online mode, going so far as to ignore its exclusivity, disadvantages, irreplaceability to the physical mode, and more.



GHOSTS

As I stepped onto the metro compartment for the first time in over two years, it felt oddly unfamiliar. The journey from my doorstep to one of the rooms in the new building in Sri Venkateswara College was one that I had undertaken countless times in my first semester in college – to the point that the route was etched in my mind. I had to change metro lines twice, but I had become so used to the journey that I could walk it with my eyes fixed on the pages of a book or my mind wandering some galaxy far away, and I would still eventually reach my destination in time.

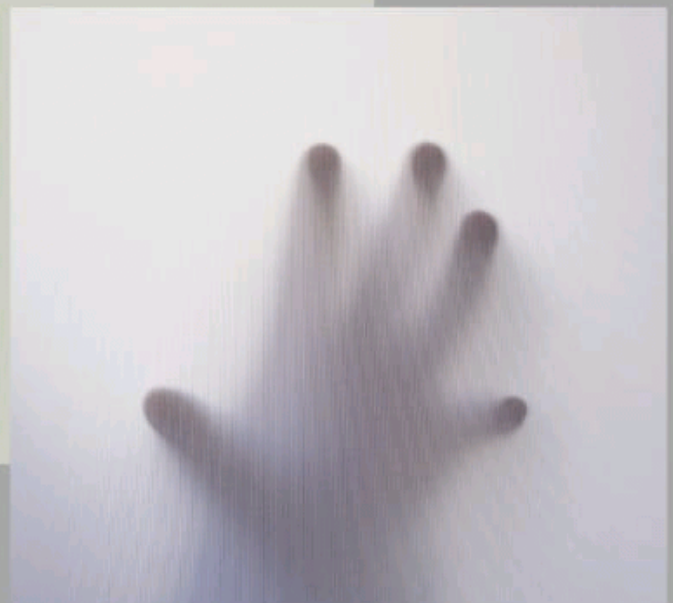
So as I left my home enroute to college after two years, I was sure that it would feel the same. It's like swimming, I told myself, once you learn, it becomes muscle memory; you never forget.

However, when I stepped onto the platform, I became very aware of how lost I was. I did not remember where I had to get off and how many stations there were in between. I did not recall which elevator to take and which direction to walk in. For the first time in two years, I had to look down at the yellow footprints on the floor, and I had to look up at the signs to check which metro to board. It felt embarrassing; this was the only route I had been sure of, and that too had begun to fade.

When I got off at my station, Durgabai Deshmukh South Campus (it had taken me shamefully long to recall that name), I hurried towards college, something I thought I remembered exactly. But that too was not the same. A part of the campus wall had been torn down to make space for a new sports arena, which, although a positive development, left me with no memory to anchor my nostalgia to.



When memory starts to fade and bits begin to disappear, we fill those crevices and voids with golden sand like the Japanese art of Kintsugi. But as more and more starts to vanish and we romanticize the remaining parts, one must ask – how much of it is the truth? And now that I stood facing the truth and failed to recognize it, I wondered, 'were my memories deceptive or has the truth changed?'.





I was stopped at the college gate, asked to present my ID, and made to log in my entry in a register I didn't recognize. That was all we had become – names, login times and, log out times. Faceless names and arbitrary times. I smiled at the security bhaiyya, and he smiled back. And that was perhaps the only moment of human contact between my college and me that I had felt in ages. My stride developed a spring as I walked towards the college building, looking for more such elements of humanity that I had unknowingly been yearning for.

All I met were ghosts. Wispy, translucent shapes that shimmered in and out of focus all around me. Ghosts of students and professors pushed past me and through me when I stepped into the foyer. When they walked through me, they left me feeling very cold even as sweat trickled down my brow. Ghosts of sounds floated in the air around me, glowing bands and waves that moved like vipers underwater. I caught distant scraps of laughter and music, phrases and words, but no complete sentences.

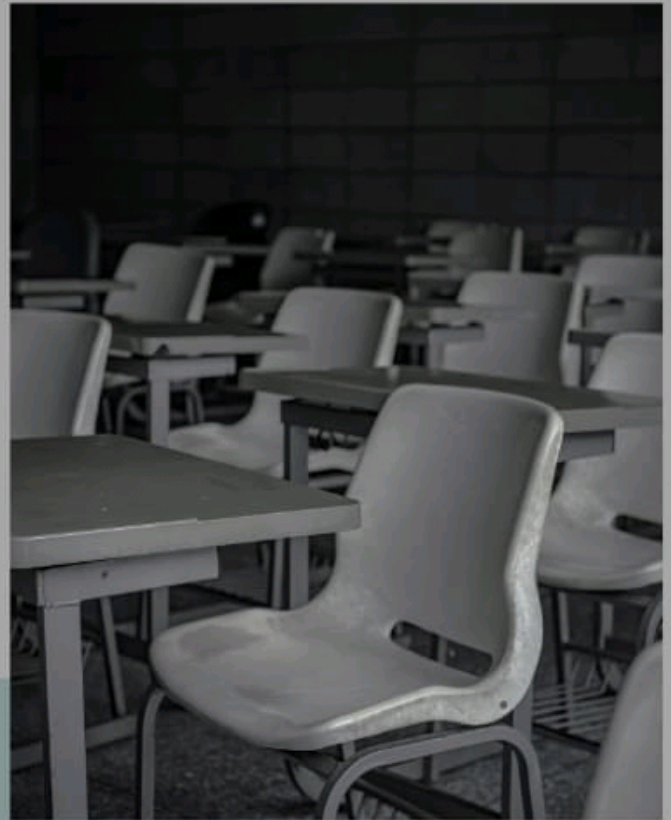
Ghosts of the college puppies played around my feet, tumbling over each other. I recognized some of them, but I couldn't call out their names because my voice wouldn't leave my throat. I didn't even think my voice was in my throat anymore; it was hiding somewhere in a corner of my ribcage, shivering, its teeth chattering as it tried to shut out the coldness left behind by the ghosts.

And then there was nothing.

The college was empty. It was a desolate landscape and strangely at odds with itself; college was not meant to be empty on a weekday. It would have comforted me if it had been in shambles, but this did not make sense at all. This emptiness was not the emptiness of a summer vacation – there was an air of finality which made me walk faster as if the roof was about to fall. A place so well-maintained was not meant to be this empty. Was the building really well-maintained then? Or were the walls rotting from the inside, the air in the haunted classrooms full of sulfurous gas? College was starting to look dangerously close to a dream deferred.

After my work in college was done, I quickly left the campus, the emptiness weighing down too hard on my chest. The ghosts had returned, and they were starting to turn malevolent. The spirits of all the classes that could have happened, the plays that could have been staged, the poems that could have been written and the friendships that could have been formed were starting to laugh maniacally, pushing and shoving as they did. A friend had once told me, "Spending six days a week together for two years would've altered our dynamics intensely," and I felt that more than ever as I despondently hurried past the friendships I had formed in my first semester that had been lost in the wake of the pandemic's destruction.

Satya Niketan, the sub-locality that was right opposite to our college campus, lay sprawled in front of me, bleak and haunted. I stood on the muddy connecting path between the two entities. Gazing at what used to be the life of South Campus, now lacking what gave it its vitality – students. The sight made my knees buckle as I measured the mammoth task we would have in front of us when college reopened finally – the task of breathing life back into this once-self-sustaining creature, essentially the hub of sustenance of college life, Satya Niketan.



It used to have photocopy shops, food joints, bookstores, PGs... most of them were shuttered. Without us students, the shops struggled to survive. Cafeteria and Co., one of the most popular restaurants frequented by professors and students alike, had closed, along with many other shops and roadside stalls. If a popular franchise had to close down one of its beloved branches, then one can imagine what the pandemic had done to the small business in Satya.

Musty and in disuse, I almost did not recognize the bookstore that I had frequented two years ago. Carefully treading the steps down to the basement, I walked in. The old shopkeeper was perched behind a desk in his usual position. But I suppose everything else was different. The bookshelves were in disarray, texts of different subjects and courses pushed together in racks that didn't fit or match. There were piles of old books on the floor, almost touching the ceiling, threatening to topple over. The shopkeeper looked like he had been sitting in that same spot for years, unmoving, his eyes glossy with a sheen that seemed almost eternal.



The short conversation we had over the browsing and buying course material told me of the people he had lost in the pandemic. He told me of his friend who used to help him manage the bookstore, the sudden loss of whom had left him unequipped to handle the store alone. These are things a stranger doesn't share, but perhaps the few students who stepped into his shop were, again, the only elements of humanity that frequented his shop now. But what struck me was something entirely different. The shopkeeper used to be up to date on the syllabi of all courses, all years. He knew of new additions to the syllabus before the students did. But today, he was clueless. He had no knowledge of our new syllabus, of the new texts or when they would arrive. He looked at me with a sort of helplessness and shook his head, "I don't know." And that was just it. He didn't know.

And that is perhaps what has happened in the pandemic. As the University so quickly hurried to move on with college education, shifting to the online mode, was so much left behind. The New Normal scares me because it pushes forward noisily like a steam engine, like a road roller, pushing everything that stands in its way into the ground. It spits out granite in the form of a neat, glossy road so that as people get used to walking on it, they forget the broken stones that were buried under it and grow blind to the un-mended, kaccha streets on either side. The New Normal waits for no one, so if you're not on board with it, you're left behind in smoke.

The New Normal scares me because I think to myself, "It must be a misnomer, right? Because surely, this can't be - the shops that used to be the lifeline of students now struggling to keep their doors open, the half-formed friendships that are now hanging by a thread, the palpable alienation and anxieties that professors and students face when sitting in a virtual class - this can't be the norm."

Surely, we know better. Surely, this isn't Normal?

HOW NORMAL IS THE NEW NORMAL?

The COVID-19 pandemic has sent the world reeling in trying to uphold a modicum of order in the face of utter chaos and death. In the past year, we have witnessed how institutions which are so essential to people's everyday lives and seem inseparable from their physical locations, have spent considerable time and effort in transitioning to the digital mode - one of them being education. This hasty transition forces us to interrogate the motivations behind the switch to online education, and its impacts such as the inequality it perpetuates due to limited access to internet and digital devices. Instead what we have is the complete opposite, we have to watch as leaders boast about the success of online education and deliberate upon its revolutionary potential. In its 2020 Highlights brochure, the University Of Delhi lauds itself on how 'seamlessly' it has shifted from classrooms and lecture halls to virtual meetings, claiming that they are ensuring 'holistic development' of students. The effort to normalize this completely abnormal mode of learning cannot go unquestioned and we all have to ask why this 'new normal' is being imposed upon us.

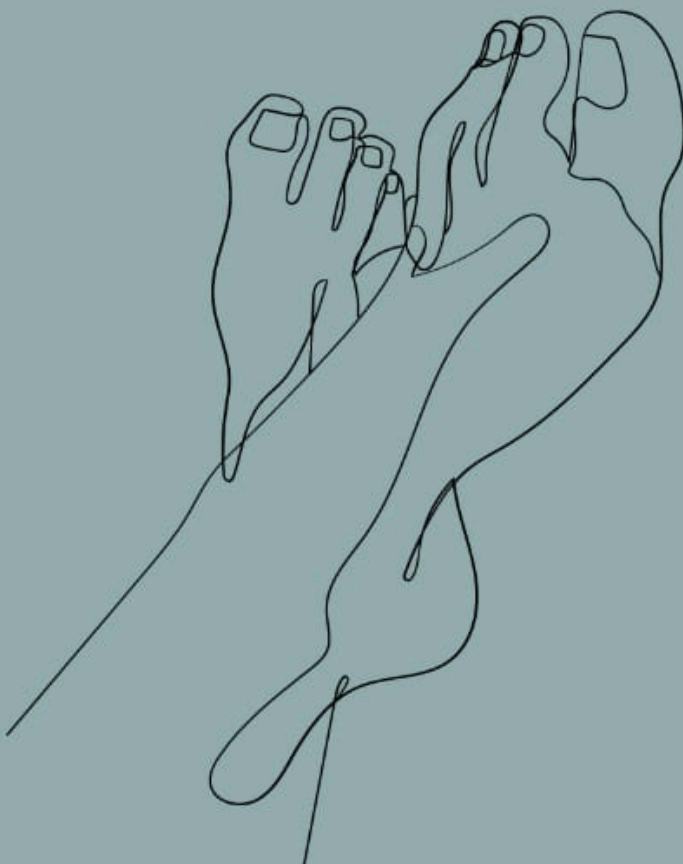


IF YOUR TEACHER CRACKS A JOKE, DO YOU UNMUTE YOURSELF TO LAUGH?

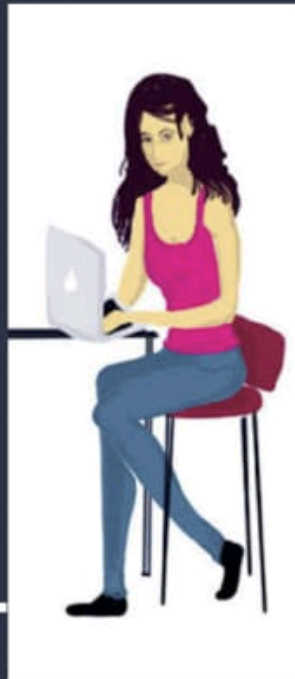
It feels deserted. Disembodied is far too clichéd to capture the aridity of this medium. A classroom is made of students sniggering, their bold interventions, their laughter, defiance, and choice moments of arriving together at a common understanding. Another is the glaring inequality in digital accessibility and the loss of classroom as an interactive place for students from more marginal backgrounds to both express and come into a dialogue.

- Dr. Suniti Madaan

The online classroom experience is both alienating and disorienting. There is a marked lack of engagement in the classroom, between the teachers and the students as well as amongst the students. Everything that makes a physical classroom come alive – from the suppressed sniggers and snippets of whispered conversation of the students to the teachers' disapproving glances – is absent. In a physical classroom there are these pockets of space which can be shared by students.



These moments lie outside the teacher's supervision and become important spaces for expressing oneself and building friendships. There is no possibility of self-expression between students in the virtual space that will not seem like an interruption to the lecture. Online classes feel empty and deserted because there is only one totalizing space which does not allow for any other form of interaction between individuals. For all the perceived autonomy online mode gives over physical space, the virtual classroom is constructed in a way that is restrictive for genuine human interactions.



It also tries to push teachers and students into certain predetermined modes of behavior that are built into the structure of these virtual meeting platforms. Any interaction that is not mediated by the teacher can only be viewed as an obstruction in teaching and has to be regulated to preserve the integrity of the learning environment. In a physical setting, the teacher would have the option of dealing with these issues in their own way. But in the online mode, teachers are forced to be the regulators of the virtual space, while the students are compelled to censor any impulse or thought that they do not want to share with everyone. Even moments of shared joy and understanding are lost since there is no way of knowing what everyone is feeling behind their screens. If your teacher cracks a joke, should you unmute yourself to laugh? Will that help in forming a shared experience, or will it just be painfully awkward? The fact that we have to ask this question, is itself a testament to how digital spaces distort the very nature we converse and relate to each other.

The fact that there is little to no interaction between teachers and students outside of the classroom only worsens the sense of despondency felt by us all. There is no opportunity to view each other as fellow human beings because we are reduced to digital icons on a screen. In such a setting, the teacher becomes only an instrument of the education system and nothing else.

THE SPECTER OF PRODUCTIVITY

It has been a lean teaching period. I don't make eye contact with students and I don't know at all if they register anything I say. There have been no nourishing breaks and the system of online dissemination is quite broken. So we seem to be at several removes from reality. If higher education is seen as alienating and elitist, I don't know where we are heading.

-Dr. Ratna Raman

The question of online learning is connected with the fundamental question of how we view education and its role in society. We have already seen how the online mode limits and redefines the roles of a teacher and a student due to the way virtual meeting softwares are structured. This means there's no in-between spaces within classes and between two classes which were so important to the school/college environment earlier. These were the moments/spaces where people interacted with each other without any inhibitions and formed friendships and communities. The new model replaces this with ruthless individualism, you cannot even feel the presence of other people the same way you would in an offline class because digital space does not allow that.

There is only you in front of your computer, furiously scribbling away to keep up with the teacher. The situation is equally sad for the teachers who cannot feel the presence of the students, cannot look them in the eye, cannot see if they're interested in the discussion or if they look like they'd rather be anywhere but here. It removes people from the equation leaving only the teacher and the student, and promotes a very instrumental view of education which in no way ensures 'holistic growth' but only the capitalistic demand of preparing the youth for the workforce.



If we look at some of the things that have happened since last year, we can encounter the specter of productivity looming large in the background. Why else would we be carrying on with all classes and societies/clubs as if nothing has happened, if not to continue to be productive members of the society? Teachers frantically tried to complete the syllabus within the tight framework of the semester while other faculty members or their own family members were falling sick to COVID. In such trying times, could the University not have made the decision to return to the annual mode? This would have given both teachers and students some flexibility and the time to take care of themselves and their families. Could we not have chosen to make the working schedule more humane? There was no such respite and instead teachers had to deal with teaching in this dreary and unfamiliar mode with the grueling clock of the semester at their backs, all while facing the psychological stress of COVID and self-isolation. Additionally, the administrative duties of professors were not lessened and dealing with college bureaucracy took up personal time which only added to the problems being faced by them.





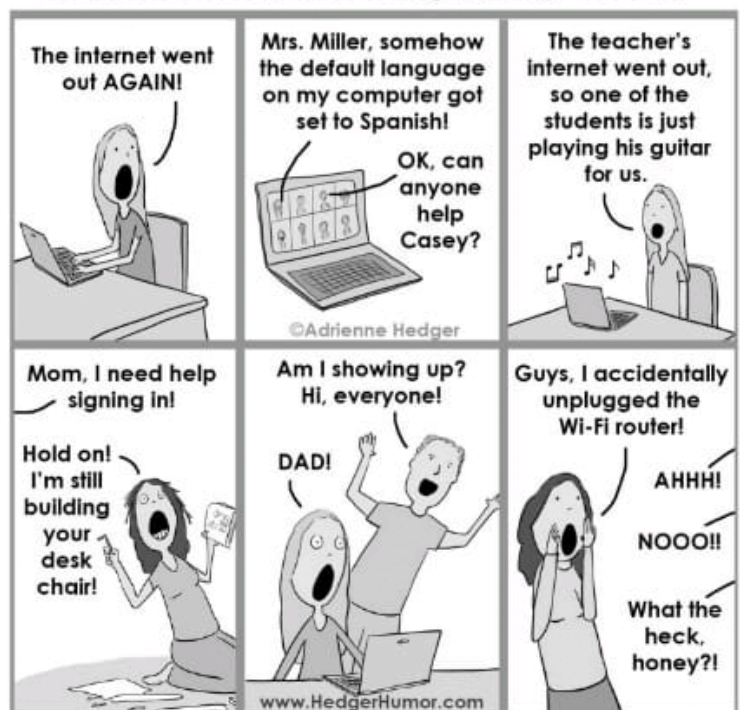
"You don't have to worry about my future any more
— I just downloaded an entire college education."

**IN ONE SENTENCE —
THE ONLINE MODE OF EDUCATION IS DEEPLY FRUSTRATING AND ALIENATING.**

For most of us before the pandemic, online education had always seemed an unlikely possibility, usually viewed with skepticism. The only zealous advocates for it were to be found in the e-learning industry. Yet, in a year it has become the dominant mode of education with very little questioning of the significant ways it changes the nature of education and the way education structures our daily lives. It is, however, a comparatively nascent medium of education and can develop in a variety of ways in the future which can provide an answer to some of the challenges it faces today. The question of how to teach science without proper laboratory equipment and experiments, for example, remains an unsolved conundrum. It definitely has untapped potential to grow, but the direction of that growth can be very different based on how we respond to it. We have already seen how in its current incarnation, online education exacerbates existing inequalities due to lack of access, how it reinforces the capitalist model of education, and promotes individuality and isolation.

And it is not necessary for the future to be any better because it is a medium that is terribly vulnerable to surveillance and data monitoring, all of which are frightening prospects. This can only be prevented if all of us do not fall prey to some half-baked notions of a techno-utopia. We must remain informed and critical of the medium to ensure that it grows in a way that is more equitable and more humane. We have to think about what education and the university space means to us.

Scenes from Schooling At My House



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