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Teaching Note

Reflections on Online Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Vignettes from an Indian Classroom

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IMAGE BY AUGUST-DE-RICHELIEU VIA PEXELS.COM

This account is written at the conclusion of a year of online teaching at a private educational institute in India. Taking stock of the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic would require both distance and clarity—privileges that are possible perhaps only with the passage of time and the assurance of safety. While neither of these are fully available to us yet, the glow of the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel' seems not too distant either. After a year and many months of waiting, the country is now sputtering back to an appearance of normalcy as vaccination drives have enabled the reopening of businesses, and educational institutes.

Despite the ravages and uncertainty of these times, educational institutions in the country have attempted to maintain a semblance of continuity in the academic progress of its students. Of course, this continuity has been the fortune of a very select portion of the nation's populace: one that has had the luxuries of internet connectivity and the financial capacity to afford education in the first place, among other privileges. This article dwells on the experiences of online teaching in a higher educational institute where most students belong to such a select demographic. The courses taught were on English language and literature for first-year undergraduate students.

Some of the most significant roadblocks in effective online classroom discussions were poor internet connectivity and large class strengths ranging from 40 to 90 and even 120 students per class. This resulted in minimal back and forth communication during classes. Students were allowed to switch off their cameras to accommodate sub-par internet connections, but teachers mostly kept their cameras on. With a one-sided dynamic such as this, classroom discussions were understandably far from optimum. These limitations were heightened especially during table-readings of plays, and debates or discussions. Many students who wished to speak could not do so because of poor internet connectivity. Others typed furiously in chat boxes, but messages appeared long after the classroom conversation had moved on. Synchronous communication, whenever it did occur, was often a stroke of good fortune.

Some discussions, however, had surprising if short-lived results. In a session about the concept of the panopticon, students were asked to think of real-life examples and they came up with instances of surveillance states and the internet. I remarked that the very "classroom" we were sitting in instantiated a reversal of the panopticon where, instead of the student being observed at all times, the teacher was monitored by faceless students and perhaps even parents. In response, my screen slowly lit up with video images of smiling students who joined in on the joke and turned on their cameras. Although fleeting, this rare instance of a completed feedback loop redeemed the usual isolation and awkwardness of online classrooms.

However, more often than not, teachers had little or no means of accessing the visual cues of students' reactions and modulating the tone of the discussion accordingly. In such cases, written assignments and follow-up discussions were some of the few ways through which communication was (partially) established. This particularly stood out in sessions where we discussed texts like William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* shortly followed by discussions on an Indian film titled *Section 375*. Both are prescribed texts in the university syllabus. While readings of *Measure for Measure* focused on the play's relevance to the contemporary context of feminism, especially the #Metoo movement, discussions of *Section 375* centred around the theme of sexual harassment trials within India.

Section 375 is an Indian film directed by the film-maker Ajay Bahl and is a story about an unpopular film director who is accused and convicted of raping a junior designer on his film set. This in itself did not particularly complicate interpretations of the text. However, the film presents a Rashomon-inspired "he-said/she-said" plot with the final revelation being that the victim had confabulated the entire accusation and that the director was, in fact, innocent. Despite my personal dislike for many aspects of the film, I believed it would serve as a useful point of discussion about issues such as the appropriateness of the timing of the film's release, the film's conceptions of feminism as a rabid movement of mob-justice, and issues concerning sexual harassment.

Once class sessions on the film commenced, many students chose to do their written assignments on the film. Considering that I heard from very few students during class, owing to the internet connection or other reasons, their written assignments were my only point of access to their thoughts, and I was very excited to be able to finally see what they had to say. What I first found was that most students, barring a select few, weren't interested in discussions on Bollywood's representations of sexual harassment, or the issue of the timing of the film's release at a cultural moment when victims in real life were just beginning to speak out. They were more enthused by the "suspense" and "mystery" of the narrative, the charismatic delivery of the protagonist, and the grandeur with which he made declarations such as: "We are in the business of law, not justice." Others pointed to how justice is a by-product of the law and ultimately a very different thing from law itself. The cynicism of some of these statements was hard to swallow, especially since these students were so young and more so because they were prospective lawyers.

When nudged later on about the appropriateness or justification for such declarations, some students agreed in class that such statements made the film's politics questionable. But many also affirmed their view that it presented what they called "important" and "very common" occurrences of false accusations of sexual harassment by victims. In later submissions of some essays, I noticed the gradual fine-tuning of some opinions. Some students shifted from gushing over the film, and making sweeping statements about the abstractness of justice, to adopting a more distant perspective as they submitted their essays. Some argued that the casting couch was to blame, and yet others mentioned in their essays that it was unfortunate that justice was not always served, but that the law was all we had. A few students also admitted in class that they did not find the exercise of examining the film easy, but that they liked to be challenged. These changes were few and rarely spotted of course, but it was mostly only through their written submissions that I could sense how much the discussion had gotten across.

One can't help but wonder how different things could have been had these discussions happened in an offline classroom. I couldn't see or hear from most other students, and so I could never know for sure what they thought. I refrained from probing far enough not only because of concerns of fairness and neutrality, but also because I simply couldn't communicate with them face to face. The queasy sense of a task inadequately accomplished, of crucial teachable moments lost, has continued to linger on.

The difficulties of rarely knowing what students thought, of gauging whether a moment was working or not, of having little or no feedback during class discussions were only a few of the many limitations of online learning. It was mostly through their writing that I uninterruptedly "heard" from my students. Admittedly, this is a risk embedded within the scope of a live-classroom as well. But these risks were experienced far more acutely this past year, and teachers weren't the only ones who felt this way. For their argumentative essays in the final exams, many students— even from engineering programs—expressed their disenchantment with online education. One student essay nostalgically reminisced about ancient educational models of the Indian Gurukul tradition where teachers and students taught and learnt while sitting under the shade of a Banyan tree. These student-responses testified to the limitations of the online classroom, but more importantly, they reaffirmed the irreplaceability of real-time communication and the tangible, embodied experiences of shared learning in an offline classroom. Unless safer times return or seamless internet connectivity becomes a reality for all, asynchronous written assignments and collaborative writing exercises might be one of the few reliable options through which to hear student-voices. Until then, we are importuned to make do with monologues into black windows on MS Teams and pixelated images streaming through cyberspace.