REPORT

ONLINE FACILITATION:
DIFFICULTIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

WEDNESDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2020

C O N T E N T S

Introduction

The fifth webinar organized by Pallavan Learning Systems explored **'Online Facilitation: Difficulties and Opportunities'**, and took place on September 30, 2020. The rapid advancement of the use of technology in education and the pandemic have changed how learning is conducted. With new hybrid learning experiences gaining traction as an indispensable tool and technique of learning, the art of online facilitation has become very significant.

This webinar sought to bring together people from diverse fields to discuss how the move towards online learning platforms need to be coupled with innovative and evolving online facilitation skills. In addition to discussing diverse types of online interaction and virtual learning, the webinar focused on education and conducting impactful online learning experiences.

The moderator of the webinar was Sudeep Chakravarti, veteran journalist and author well versed with online interaction. The speakers included Mriganka Madhukaillya, teacher, IIT Guwahati; Penjor Ghaley, head of Computer Science department and teacher at the Royal Academy in Bhutan; and Trassy Cathrina D'Rozario, student at SFX Greenherald International School in Bangladesh. The audience of the webinar comprised teachers, educators, facilitators, learners as well as friends of Pallavan Learning Systems.

The webinar was broken down into three main sections. The first section dealt with the technological aspect of online facilitation, with a focus on recommended platforms and interfaces - their functionalities and their shortcomings. The second part discussed the best approaches and techniques of online facilitation, with an emphasis on retaining interest and engagement and assessing outcomes and effectiveness. The third section addressed an array of challenges and opportunities associated with online learning and facilitation.

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Back to
Content Page

Technological Aspect - Platforms, Software, and Interface

The speakers had a discussion regarding which platforms and software were best suited for online learning and facilitation. It was noted that there were numerous platforms available and every institution or educator had to decide on an appropriate platform, or a combination of applications and software, for themselves. At present, the available software can be broadly categorized based on their primary function – resource sharing, messaging, video conferencing, or assessment.

The pros and cons of various platforms were discussed. Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meets seemed to be widely used but were viewed as being passive and inflexible at times. Discord was presented as an option that was more engaging and interactive. While deciding on a platform for online facilitation, it is also crucial to factor in how invasive the application is, cost of the platform, and features such as one-to-one chat and break-out rooms. WhatsApp was mentioned as a useful application for dissemination of information and quick sharing of class schedules, PDFs and PPTs. In instances where digital connectivity and technological resources were major challenges, SMS and telephonic interaction have proven to be crucial.

It was also noted that several learning management systems for education are in the process of being developed. At the same time, available technological tools are constantly being upgraded. Educators and learners need to keep abreast of all these developments so that they are able to make online learning more meaningful.

The speakers felt that while technological tools are important, online learning should be more about student engagement. While individual teachers may use a platform that suits them best, they need to ensure that they are able to effectively communicate with their students and be a part of their learning journey. Learners and their process of learning should always take precedence over technology. Whatever the platform may be, we need to ensure that learners are encouraged to take ownership of their learning process; only then will technology emerge as an effective tool for continual learning and growth.

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Back to
Content Page

Best Approaches/Techniques

The moderator introduced the next section of the webinar and asked the speakers to discuss some of the best techniques for online learning and facilitation. The speakers agreed that while individual methods and styles may differ, there were some core approaches that had great potential for maximizing learning outcomes.

Easy and efficient delivery of content:

One of the first things that we need to consider while transacting online learning is to ensure that the content is delivered to the students in the easiest way possible. Often, that can mean using an array of platforms or applications depending on the task at hand. A teacher may choose to share the schedule on WhatsApp, send the prior readings via email, organize group work on Google drive, and conduct online interactions on Zoom. Or an institute may employ a learning management system to streamline all these activities. In either case, the key elements are consistency and communication. The students need to know what to expect and understand what educators' expectations from them are. To ensure that everyone is on the same page, teachers should share detailed plans outlining the learning process, learning outcomes and assessment methodologies. Sharing information and asking learners for their feedback and input on a regular basis will not only make the learners feel included in the learning process but also encourage them to take ownership and chart out their learning journey.

Contextualization and individualization:

The delivery of content needs to be coupled with contextualization. The content can be easily delivered by the machine but it is up to the facilitator to contextualize the content, give clarity to the concepts, and help learners make connections to their environment and real-life situations.

Also, a separate level of contextualization can also be employed in the name of individualization. And this is where online learning has a huge advantage over physical classrooms. Technology provides the tools to contextualize the content to individual learners by focusing on their

backstories and unique areas of strengths and challenges, designing specific lesson plans and posing corresponding questions, and charting individual learning trajectories for them. Contextualization can lead to effective individualized learning plans for all learners while they are encouraged to play a key role and take ownership of their learning.

Connection and relationship:

In order for contextualization to be effective, educators need to genuinely connect with learners and get to know them both on an intellectual as well as personal level. That is why, it is crucial that online learning has a strong component of teacher-student interactions where understanding and trust can be built. Since the physicality of interactions is removed in an online environment, teachers need to work harder to ensure that they are able to form genuine relations with their learners. They need to conduct more one-to-one sessions with the learners and discuss their growth not only in the cerebral development but also in the other four crucial areas – physical, social, emotional and spiritual. The relationship between the teacher and student will go a long way in dictating the ease and joy of learning.

Student engagement:

It is important that we realize that learning, whether physical or online, can only be impactful if learners are engaged and intrinsically motivated to move forward in their learning journey. One of the biggest challenges relating to online learning has been to ensure that students are focused and engaged. Because the physical environment and the associated stimulus with face-to-face learning is taken out of the equation, it can prove difficult for most to remain engaged. In addition, staring at the screen for hours can lead to a loss of focus and concentration. It is important that educators come up with innovative ways for learners to retain focus and interest. The constant use of audio-visual interactive tools can make a huge difference in this regard. Also, it is important that students are involved in group discussions. Break-up rooms and chat boxes can be powerful if used appropriately. Other simple ways of retaining student engagement can be requesting them to keep their camera on, giving breaks after every hour, and allowing online time with their peers without supervision.

Parental involvement:

Since online learning means that students operate from homes, the community of parents, guardians, caregivers and family members has come to the forefront as having an immense potential to impact learning. It is crucial that teachers reach out to parents and guardians to involve them in their child's learning by developing a relationship and having regular interaction with them. Family members need to be meaningfully engaged to create a robust learning community with the support from teachers. Even in cases where parents and guardians may not be able to contribute significantly in the area of cerebral development, they could have a huge impact on the social, emotional and spiritual development of the child.

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Back to
Content Page

Ongoing Challenges and Foreseeable Opportunities

The third section of the webinar dealt with the question of ongoing challenges and foreseeable opportunities. Speakers were asked to discuss some of the biggest hurdles with online learning and facilitation, and then ponder upon opportunities associated with it.

Challenges:

Technological issues:

There are numerous technical challenges associated with the use of technology for online facilitation at present. Loss of connectivity, unintended disruptions, purposeful interruptions, and limited time usage for some platforms are common problems. The digital divide and lack of resources and connectivity have also proven to be persisting issues.

Steep learning curve:

Everybody has had to learn and adapt to new ways of delivering and imbibing online learning in a matter of a very short span of time. Both teachers and students have been exposed to a variety of teaching and learning methods at a rapid pace, and they have been expected to deal with emerging issues and find solutions as they move forward.

That is why it is only fair to expect most of them to be going through a difficult time and feeling burnt out and exhausted. What we need to do is to acknowledge that we are all on a learning journey, and a very steep one at that. Being cognizant of this fact, we need to be more understanding and tolerant, and give time to one another to learn, unlearn and adapt.

Assessment:

The old method of conducting closed-book examination will not work for the current form of online learning. Already, there have been numerous cases of educators not being able to ensure that students do not cheat during an exam – either by referring to textbooks for answers, looking up the answers on the net, or by receiving additional help from family members and peers. Also,

there are issues associated with the practicality of receiving photos of assignments as proof of student work and the limitations of not being able to provide instant feedback to boost student progress.

We need to think of new innovative ways of assessing and evaluating student learning. In addition to formulating a robust assessment plan for the development in the intellectual or cerebral area, there is a need for a framework to gauge and enhance our ethical system and other areas of development - physical, social, emotional and spiritual.

Mental and digital wellbeing:

For many learners, educational institutes provide not just a place where they 'learn' things but also a safe environment in which they can develop emotionally and socially. The online situation has not been able to provide the same platform as of yet. There is a need for educators and students to work together to create an online environment where the platform can evolve into a safe space for everyone to share their ideas, thoughts and emotions. As noted before, there is a requirement for a lot more one-on-one interactions and group discussions among teachers and students.

Teachers and students also need to be aware of the number of hours they are spending in front of a screen and make adjustments accordingly so that there are no adverse effects on their physical and mental wellbeing.

Opportunities:

Student ownership:

Online facilitation and learning has greatly transformed the role of teachers and enhanced learners' involvement in being able to chart their own learning trajectory. This is a great opportunity to ensure that learners are more self-reliant and self-motivated. We need to include them by incorporating their feedback and input in the learning process as much as possible. We need to encourage them to perform self-assessment and provide all the tools for them to do so effectively. In time, learners should be able to objectively critique their own work and assess their own skills, processes and growth.

Purpose of education:

The move towards online facilitation and learning has given us a moment to pause and ponder on the purpose of education. If we can ensure that that online learning leads to the enhancement of student ownership in the learning process, then we are moving in the right direction. If we articulate the purpose of education as 'help students learn how to learn', then we need to constantly update our framework of online facilitation to achieve that outcome. As we move forward, the focus should be on enhancing teachers' and learners' capabilities so that they are equipped with skills and processes to enable learners to become self-learning, self-monitoring and self-assessing individuals.

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Back to
Content Page

A Synthesis by Pallavan Learning Systems

Online Facilitation and Enhancing Learner Engagement

Facilitation has always held an important role in almost all spheres of life. In education, it has held an even more important role and a good teacher has become synonymous with being a good facilitator in the 21st century. With the onset of the pandemic and changing nature of the educational landscape, facilitation has taken on a whole new meaning. How can we effectively facilitate a conversation, a debate or a class when we are behind screens, sometimes in different countries or continents?

In terms of technology, there are numerous platforms available and every institution or educator has to decide on an appropriate platform, or a combination of applications and software, for themselves. However, while technological tools are important, online learning should be more about student engagement. While individual teachers may use a platform that suits them best, they need to ensure that they are able to effectively communicate with their students and be a part of their learning journey. Learners and their process of learning should always take precedence over technology. Whatever the platform may be, we need to ensure that learners are encouraged to take ownership of their learning process; only then will technology emerge as an effective tool for continual learning and growth.

One of the first things that we need to consider while transacting online learning is to ensure that the content is delivered to the students in the easiest way possible. Often, that can mean using an array of platforms or applications depending on the task at hand. Whatever may be the mode of delivery, the key elements are consistency and communication. The students need to know what to expect and understand what educators' expectations from them are. Equally important to ensure is that the delivery of content is coupled with contextualization. The content can be easily delivered by the machine but it is up to the facilitator to contextualize the content, give clarity to the concepts, and help learners make connections to their environment and real-life situations.

In order for contextualization to be effective, educators need to genuinely connect with learners and get to know them both on an intellectual as well as personal level. Trust and understanding are crucial factors that can contribute to the success of online learning experiences. The relationship between the teacher and student can go a long way in dictating the ease and joy of

learning. It is important that we realize that learning, whether physical or online, can only be impactful if learners are engaged and intrinsically motivated to move forward in their learning journey.

There are numerous technical challenges associated with the use of technology for online facilitation at present. Loss of connectivity, unintended disruptions, purposeful interruptions, and limited time usage for some platforms are common problems. The digital divide and lack of resources and connectivity have also proven to be persisting issues. Also, both teachers and students have been exposed to a variety of teaching and learning methods at a rapid pace and expected to adapt accordingly. This has led to feelings of fatigue and disillusionment. We need to acknowledge that different stakeholders involved in the learning process are going through their own challenges and changes, be it familial, career, technological or well-being related. There is room for improvement on all fronts but it is crucial that we are understanding of each other, tolerant of inevitable challenges and errors, and in a constant learning mode.

Online facilitation and learning has greatly transformed the role of teachers and enhanced learners' involvement in being able to chart their own learning trajectory. This is a great opportunity to ensure that learners are more self-reliant and self-motivated. As we move forward, the focus should be on enhancing teachers' and learners' capabilities so that they are equipped with skills and processes to enable learners to become self-learning, self-monitoring and self-assessing individuals.

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