From classrooms to computers

The success of online learning depends on students' ability to grasp concepts, faculty preparedness and the quality of digital content, experts tell *Dhanyata M Poovaiah*

The current crisis is forcing schools and colleges to adopt online teaching and learning tools.

As the pandemic has altered the way we live, education is among the sectors that are expected to see long-term changes. According to UNESCO, over 1.5 billion students worldwide have been affected due to the 'temporary' closure of educational institutions on account of Covid-19.

The current crisis has pushed schools and colleges to switch to online platforms overnight to ensure that learning does not get affected.

"We are seeing a forced reliance on digital education. Faculty and students are putting in efforts to get used to online mode of learning. In future, this may result in an increased dependence on digital education, possibly for courses that otherwise could be done in a lecture mode. For those that require active student participation and critical thinking, classroom learning may still be a desirable option," says Professor G Raghuram, Director, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

Though online learning and teaching is expected to be the new normal, educators believe that the post Covid-19 era will see a balance between online and offline mode, since many higher education fields such as engineering, architecture, medicine etc., require experimenting and experiential learning.

Knowledge and learning

"The success of this hybrid model will depend on students' self-discipline, faculty preparedness, project based learning, skill training based on the industry needs, state of the art infrastructure, good digital content and mutual online and offline discussions," says Dr K N Subramanya, Principal, RV College of Engineering, Bengaluru.

"Human intervention, developing human values, team work and maintaining teacher-student relationship will definitely continue. Routine and repetitive activities will get digitised and students will have more time for exploring new ideas," says Dr Subramanya.

As there is more to learning than just exams at the end of the academic year, many colleges including those in the hinterlands are also looking at reworking the way subjects are taught.

"There is a need for subject-oriented teaching that enhances the knowledge and skills of students rather than teaching from an exam point of view. We are looking at changing teaching methods, improving digital infrastructure, promoting skill-based learning and entrepreneurial activities," says Darshan Madappa, Assistant Professor, First Grade College, Murnad, Kodagu.

As there is uncertainty on when schools will reopen, many schools have started conducting classes and tests online. This shift has placed a greater onus on parents to ensure that children learn at home.

"We are preparing videos and digital content and are sharing them with parents. Though initially, there were some hindrance to suddenly switching to a different form of teaching and learning, now we are receiving positive feedback," says Dr Upasana Yadav, Principal, Army Public School ASC Centre and College.

Schools and colleges are also conscious of the digital divide that exists in the country.

"As most families at least have a smart phone, we are developing content that is compatible with such phones. And with WhatsApp, it is easier to share content," says Dr Upasana.

The on-going crisis has also brought the importance of the EdTech industry to the forefront, with students around the world depending on online platforms to fulfill their daily learning needs. The biggest sector of online learning will be 'supplemental learning' for students enrolled in primary and secondary classes in school.

"A crucial takeaway from this crisis would be the resounding importance of 'learning at home'. Learning at home is important to achieve academic success while learning at school. More students and parents will see how this process can be digitised with the help of EdTech platforms. From visual learning to gamified content, the students of today who are digital-natives, will see how EdTech platforms are helping them achieve a deeper understanding of concepts," says Mrinal Mohit, COO, Head of Sales & Marketing, Think & Learn Pvt Ltd.

Even coaching institutes for competitive exams are increasing their digital presence these days.

"With the penetration of internet and access to technology, the way coaching institutes function will definitely change. There has been an evident change especially during the lockdown where many who were hesitant, are now forced to adapt and this adaptation may be permanent," says M P Rajesh Ponnappa, faculty at Namma KPSC.

"Online classes offer more flexibility and hence could be the new way of learning, if not the only way," says Rajesh.