Transitioning towards Online Teaching and Learning

By Rizwan Wadood | May 15, 2020

Covid-19, like on many others things, has cast a spell on education too. It has brought a disruption in the teaching and learning process leading to a sense of uncertainty among students, parents, educators and policy makers alike. The challenge is huge and uncertainties are multiple yet the show must go on and learning must never stop. This proved the driving mantra for the education administrators. Every challenge leads to discovering a new path, and UAE too carved its own path- the path of Online teaching and learning.

The journey of online teaching is the journey of cumulative experience of the different stakeholders. Let's hear from them to understand this journey starting from trepidation to one of gradual comfort and inherent promise.

Like any concerned parent, Susan Sherry Thomas, a HR professional experienced a feeling of anxiety with the introduction of online teaching. To start with, she believed that "students up to grade 6, including her own, will not be able to cope up". But this fear emerged more from her own anxiety than that of her child. "My fear as a parent. Kids had no clue about online learning", is how put it. How did she deal with the challenge?"Monitoring kids closely during online learning and motivating them to concentrate," she said. Her daughter, too had her own concerns but less to do with teaching and more with aspects like stressful to eyes, missing face to face interaction to clarify doubts and lack of peer interaction and fun.

The story moves forward with Sandhya Kattayat, a college teacher herself, echoing similar concerns yet seeing merits in online teaching. She started with the challenge of the "possibility of less interactivity between teachers and students" but closed with a hopeful note; "new platform for exploration with immense possibilities in instruction." Her daughter, Anupama Menon, Grade XI, Bright Riders School, feels that once past operational issues, it helps more in time management. She also believes that one day "we will only have online teaching globally".

Another parent, Perwez Siddiqui, a telecom professional, further validates the use of technology for teaching but extends suggestions on developing mechanisms for newer ways of involving and engaging kids since it is experimental for them. Similarly, with added values like time efficiency, collaborative rich content and swift adaptation by all stakeholders, he sees online teaching evolving and shaping into an alternate to traditional physical class rooms. His daughter, Lubna Siddiqui, grade 8, Virginia International Private School, says that her initial apprehension of absence of direct interaction withher peers and teachers are ably replaced by group chats and individual focus by teachers. She sums up, "it's an extensive tool to create future leaders, learners and innovators."

Dr. Pulak Puneet, another parent, raises usual concerns of "child's involvement", "monitoring student's progression" and "interactivity" but adds another perspective to the discussion. If these issues are attended to creatively, he finds online teaching full of potential if developed in an imaginative way. Like father like daughter. Shaaranya Sinha, Grade 6, GEMS Cambridge International Academy, Abu Dhabi, misses meeting friends but also lists two best things about online studying as comfort and interesting video meetings.

A teacher is a direct stakeholder to the discussion. Lubna Kazi, a grade 7 Mathematics teacher at GEMS United Indian School, Abu Dhabi, brings an insight into this: senders and receivers both have to amend themselves to this new model of teaching. She elaborates, "the biggest focus area has to be maintaining "netiquettes"; regulating student behavior, catering to individual child's need, and help detach students from their comfort zone–HOME and keep them in a virtual learning world." She strongly believes that online teaching is a start of better future in the education system.

This journey of varied experiences probably completes with the feedback of two daughters of this author, both students of Mayoor Private School, Abu Dhabi. Asna, the 7th grader feels it's a new way of learning. Although she misses on school fun with friends but is at least happy to connect with them albeit virtually. The younger one, Inaya, the fifth grader, in a way provides the takeaway, "I look forward to my classes but I will tell my teacher to clear my doubts more."

The cumulative experience though has identified many gaps like lack of face to face interaction, absence of peer interaction, increased

time on technology etc. Gaps are natural in any system. But such genuine concerns can be addressed. Can the lack of face to face interaction be dealt with by mixing online classes with a few days of on-school classes? Just a thought. Needs more deliberations.

The takeaway of the experience is that all stakeholders have to hear to each other; teachers to students, students to teachers, parent to administrators and administrators to policymakers. Hear of the gaps and fix them to make online a robust teaching option among existing ones.

In this journey of transition, we also have something to learn from our young learners. They don't fear the unknown,rather co-opt and make a success out of a challenge. A success in which the technology aids and learners adapt creatively to learn differently.

So far, in its nascent stage, the journey to online learning has been a journey in unexplored territory. A journey that started with the fear of doing something untried that quickly melted into a willingness to adapt and finally ending with reposing faith in the discovery of a new path. One more path.

A new path does not necessarily has to be seen in terms of either/or. On the contrary, it can be an amalgamation of existing options. Online teaching may not substitute on-school teaching but can be an option for delivering some courses or few courses, some situations or few situations, and a part of the whole process of education delivery.

Let's welcome this new path of learning, teaching and living. Welcome to Online teaching.

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