

B-schools seek classroom dynamics as they wrestle with online classes



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Faculty place premium on in-class feel but see hybrid models dominating

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Soumyashanto Mandal was understandably nervous when he started online classes for the one-year executive post-graduate programme in management at IIM Bangalore early in May. An architect with a master's in urban planning, Mandal had decided to take the plunge despite the challenge online classes posed. "The importance of being on campus, and the strong peer learning experience in the classroom cannot be emphasised enough. The initial days online were confusing and challenging," he says, but added that he and his batch of 73 students adapted quickly.

B-schools round the country embarking on their academic year have been forced to go

online because of Covid-19. Deans of the top schools are hoping to start physical classes as soon as possible, as they say, there is nothing to replace the classroom dynamics in a management programme.

Says Prof G Raghuram, Director, IIM-B: "Our assessment, based on the experience over the past two months, is that in-class would be superior to online, both from the perspective of the students and the faculty. Hence, we will look at starting in-class as soon as possible."

The main advantages of online classes, he explains, are access and convenience. The disadvantage is that many subjects that build on critical thinking require more face-to-face discussion between the instructor and participants. "In such courses, online tends to

have a lower learning effectiveness. In courses that are more knowledge-driven, the differential in learning between online and in-class can be reduced. Also, given that many parts of the country have challenges with bandwidth and power, online classes are proving to be a challenge," explains Raghuram.

A new experience

Rajjan Banerjee, Dean, SPIJMR, where 400-plus students are in online classes, says it is easier to record classes and have material available before/after the class. With more tools, a lot of classroom interactivity can be replicated in creative ways.

"It takes courage to speak up in a classroom. Chat is less threatening, and you may find new people participating. At a larger, societal level, we have a limited number of good teachers. Online has the potential to make strong teachers avail-

able to a much larger student community," he says.

However, he is quick to add that it is difficult to replicate peer learning and face-to-face faculty interactions beyond the classroom. "B-school is a social experience, and that gets diluted. The quality of energy and feedback in a physical classroom is difficult to replicate. Some elements of spontaneity and intensity are reduced," elaborates Banerjee.

Moreover, with online classes plus the phone, news and Netflix, students spend too much time on screens in a day and it's difficult to concentrate on a small screen for long. "You need fewer classes in a day than physically," he adds.

Both the B-school heads agree that the direct feedback and energy of a classroom add to the dynamics and improve learning. "In-class activity like role-play and physical simula-

tions cannot happen online. The other is that we often teach more than the subject, and this happens in conversations with faculty and small groups outside the classroom. This is spontaneous and difficult to replicate," says Banerjee.

"The ability to fine-tune the pace and emphasis of delivery, the ability to sense which questions must be taken right away versus which questions can be postponed or taken offline are all important aspects that benefit classes," adds Raghuram.

Suresh Ramanathan, Dean, Great Lakes Institute of Management, while agreeing that peer-to-peer learning and interaction in classroom learning are of singular importance, has a different take on online learning. "If businesses are going to change their models as a result of Covid-19, we can expect B-schools also to go through some introspection. I expect online may be used to

complement what is taught in the classroom. Such hybrid models may become more common, especially if B-schools can perfect content and delivery. I also believe that schools that lag behind in adapting themselves to these changes may find themselves value-disadvantaged in the new normal," he explains.

Customisation possible

Online classes, if executed well, can provide opportunities to get deep into a topic. For that, they must not be treated simply as a way to deliver a lecture as in the classroom, says Ramanathan. "Rather, they need to be broken into multiple small sections, each with built-in challenges to promote deep thinking. In the conventional classroom, a professor often simply provides a lot of content, leaving the thinking to be done outside the classroom, if at all. Online

classes can reimagine this, with the professor taking on a more facilitative role in nurturing insight," he elaborates.

However, if not executed well, online classes can be very monotonous. Students have a short attention span, and a dull lecture will result in loss of attention. "Online classes will also create problems of assessment, with only some formats of exams being more deliverable without fear of plagiarism or dishonesty," adds Ramanathan.

With their overheads down, B-schools may consider reducing fees if there's a prolonged delay in reopening. Great Lakes, for instance, charges ₹19 lakh for food, hostel and study materials for its 1-year MBA and may look to adjust fees for hostels and food.

While both have their pros and cons, for now, B-school deans are plumping for classroom learning.



The quality and feedback in a physical classroom is difficult to replicate in an online learning model, say B-school faculty

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Most faculty place a premium on the in-class experience but see hybrid models dominating the future

Soumyashanto Mandal was understandably nervous when he started online classes for the one-year executive post graduate programme in management at IIM Bangalore in early May. An architect with a master's in urban planning, Mandal had decided to take the plunge despite the challenge that online classes posed. "The importance of being on campus in the heart of activities and the strong peer learning experience in the classroom cannot be

emphasized enough. The initial days of online were confusing and challenging,” he says, though he and his batch of 73 students adapted quickly.

As B-schools round the country embarked on their academic year, forced to go online with the Covid-19 pandemic, Deans of the top schools are hoping to start physical classes as soon as possible as, they say, there is nothing to replace classroom dynamics in a management programme. Says Prof G Raghuram, Director, IIMB, “Our assessment, based on the initial experience over the past two months, is that in-class would be superior to online, both from the perspective of the students and the faculty. Hence, we would look at starting in-class as soon as possible.”

The main advantages of online classes, he explains, are access and convenience. The disadvantage is that many subjects that build on critical thinking require a lot more face-to-face discussion between instructor and participants. “In such courses, online tends to have a lower learning effectiveness. In courses which are more knowledge-driven, the differential in learning between online and in-class can be reduced. Also, given that many parts of the country have difficulty in bandwidth and power, the online classes are proving to be a challenge,” explains Raghuram.

Replacing the in-class experience

Ranjan Banerjee, Dean, SPJIMR, where 400-plus students are in online classes, says it is easier to record classes and have material available before/after the class. With more new tools, a lot of classroom interactivity can be replicated in creative ways. “It takes courage to speak up in a classroom. Chat is relatively less threatening, and you may find new people participating. At a larger, societal level, we have a limited number of good teachers. Online has the potential to make strong teachers available to a much larger student community,” he says.

However, he’s quick to add that it is difficult to replicate peer learning beyond the classroom, and face-to-face faculty interactions beyond the classroom. “B-school is a social experience, and that gets diluted. The quality of energy and feedback in a physical classroom is difficult to replicate. Some elements of spontaneity and intensity are reduced,” elaborates Banerjee.

Moreover, with online classes plus the phone, news and Netflix, students spend too much time on screens in a day and it’s difficult to concentrate with eyes on a small screen for long. “You need fewer classes in a day than you would have physically,” he adds.

Different dynamics

Both the B-school heads agree that the direct feedback and energy of a classroom adds to the dynamics and improves learning. “In-class activity like role-play and physical simulations cannot happen online. The other is that we often teach more than the subject, and this happens in conversations with faculty and small groups outside the classroom. This is spontaneous and difficult to replicate online,” says Banerjee.

“The ability to fine-tune the pace and emphasis of delivery, the ability to sense which questions must be taken right away versus which questions can be postponed or taken offline

are all important aspects that benefit classes, which especially have critical thinking as an important learning paradigm,” adds Raghuram.

Suresh Ramanathan, Dean, Great Lakes Institute of Management, while agreeing that the peer-to-peer learning and interaction in classroom learning are of singular importance, has a different take on online learning. “If businesses are going to change their business models as a result of Covid-19, we can expect B-schools also to go through some introspection. I expect online may be used to complement what is taught in the classroom. Such hybrid models may become more common, especially if B-schools can perfect content and delivery. I also believe that schools that lag behind in adapting themselves to these changes may find themselves value-disadvantaged in the new normal,” he explains.

Deep dives, customisation possible

Online classes, if executed well, can provide opportunities to get deep into a topic. For that, they must not be treated simply as a way to deliver a lecture the same way it would in the classroom, elaborates Ramanathan. “Rather, they need to be broken into multiple small sections, each with built-in challenges to promote deep thinking. In the conventional classroom, a professor often simply provides a lot of content, leaving the thinking to be done outside the classroom, if at all. Online classes can reimagine this model, with the professor taking on a more facilitative role in nurturing insight,” he elaborates.

Online classes can also be used to customise delivery of content based on individual needs. Not every student needs to be treated the same way, and hence professors do not have to teach to a standard closer to the lowest common denominator in learning ability, says Dean Ramanathan.

However, if online classes are not executed well, they can become very monotonous. Students have a low attention span, and a poorly executed online lecture will result in loss of attention very early. “Online classes will also create problems of assessment, with only some formats of exams being more deliverable without fear of plagiarism or dishonesty,” adds Ramanathan. While both have their pros and cons, for now B-school deans plump for classroom learning.

Link: <https://bloncampus.thehindubusinessline.com/b-school-corner/b-schools-see-classroom-dynamics-as-they-wrestle-with-online-classes/article31877179.ece>