Short Communication

Tryst with uncertainty: Efforts of Department of Library and Information Science, University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal, India

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1. Introduction

The whisper that started circulating in the air at the end of December 2019 ultimately has grown into a roar. Yes, a new strain and highly contagious virus known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (World Health Organization, n.d.) is spreading like a bush fire in every corner of earth, infecting every continent, the outbreak of which was first noticed in Wuhan, a city in Hubei province, China.

The extremely infectious nature of the virus and its special affinity for aged human population with some kind of pre-existing lifestyle diseases is causing widespread death and has forced the world economy into a grinding halt. In the absence of a definite curative therapy, governments have implemented lockdown resulting in complete closure of all academic, industrial, and social activities and enforced home confinement. In India, as the number of Corona infected cases rose steadily, a 14-hour voluntary public curfew (7a.m. to 9p.m.) was observed on 22nd March (Desk, 2020) as was proposed by the Prime Minister of India and eventually followed by implementation of pan India lockdown in three phases for 21, 19, and ongoing days respectively started on 25 March and continuing. Since then, all the academic institutions are closed. As this extraordinary situation has brought about multiple challenges in the conventional teaching-learning environment, it was felt that an overhaul of faculty-student communication process in a university set-up was imminent.

In the following, we give an account of contactless remote interaction with students of the Department of Library and Information Science (DLIS), University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal, India.

2. The challenges

University of Gour Banga was established in the year 2008 (University of Gour

Banga, n.d.) with a motto to impart higher education among the people of socio-economically most disadvantaged district of Malda (Development and Planning Department Government of West Bengal, 2007), North and South Dinajpur. The Department of Library and Information Science started functioning in the year 2016 and is currently offering Master of Library and Information Science, Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Being part of the university teaching faculty, it remains a constant challenge for us to overcome the shadow of regional socio-economic disadvantages. Most of the students in this region are first generation learners and have had their studies in vernacular (Bengali) medium till undergraduate level. Naturally, they are not comfortable with the idea of receiving instructions as well as writing examination papers in the English language. There is no public library with rich collection of resources. There is slow or inadequate internet infrastructure and apart from low end smartphone, ill affordance of internet enabled devices by economically challenged students are some of the ground realities that we keep in mind before arriving at any decision. As COVID-19 pandemic forced the university system to shut down all the academic and administrative activities, a number of issues cropped up in DLIS:

- How long will the lockdown last?
- Postponement of 1st and 3rd semester examinations of 2020 and rescheduling of the same.
- Conduction of remote online classes for 2nd and 4th semester papers.

Out of all the above mentioned issues, the third was of particular concern as the kind of infrastructure and mindset necessary to truly go online were lacking. Moreover, most of the students in this socio-economically disadvantaged region are from very remote villages where mobile internet telecommunications do not have robust 4G or Voice over LTE (VoLTE) services and only one or two out of twenty one (maximum intake capacity) students have laptop while none had tablet. It may be mentioned here that smartphones are great at connecting people but are probably not as convenient as a laptop or a desktop when the question of multitasking is raised. Also, in absence of dedicated broadband connection, communication networks become disrupted with frequent loss of signal. Moreover, to provide smartphones for remote learning, students will have to bear the cost of data usage which might be prohibitive.

3. The action

With each passing day in home confinement, it was increasingly felt by the Faculty that COVID-19 pandemic will probably be with us for quite a long time. It became apparent that we must find ways and means to keep the teaching-learning machinery running with whatever resources we have at our disposal, as students were growing anxious about their career. A departmental committee meeting was convened over the telephone among the Library and Information Science (LIS) faculty members during the beginning of the month of April this year to deliberate upon:

– Going online for teaching-learning activities
– Primary means of communication with students
– Format of files to be shared with students
– Resources to be shared

The following resolutions were taken at the end of the meeting:

– DLIS, University of Gour Banga would go online for teaching-learning activities and the authority would be duly informed.
– As the DLIS created two whatsapp group namely 'Library and Information Science' and 'M.lib.I.Sc 3rd sem' respectively at the beginning of first and third semester of Master of Library and Information Science post graduate degree course, and after knowing that all the students have access to smartphone, it was decided that whatsapp would be the primary application software for communication.
– Contents would be shared in most popular and common file formats such as pdf, jpg, doc, m4a, mp3, mp4, etc.
– It was also decided that the following open access online resources would preferably be utilised in the absence of physical access to university library resources:

  1. Egyankosh, a digital repository of Indira Gandhi National Open University self learning material (http:// egyankosh.ac.in/)
  2. Epgpathshala, a Ministry of Human Resource Development project (https:// epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/)
  3. YouTube educational contents

  In addition to that, hand written lecture notes prepared by the faculties would be photographed with smartphone camera and shared in jpg file format on whatsapp platform if required.
– Brief audio recording of lectures (not exceeding 15 minutes) of LIS faculty members giving the overview of content and explanation of relatively difficult concepts would precede the sharing of related content.
– No video conferencing application like Zoom would be used given the digital divide.

4. The outcome

As the department launched remote and online mode of teaching-learning concept, students were duly informed about it beforehand. Uncertain about the immediate impact, we noticed that the above mentioned *modus operandi* was welcomed by our students with lukewarm response and a certain feeling of alienation. Although uncomfortable, they gradually became used to this virtual interaction. Still, they expressed certain difficulties, including:
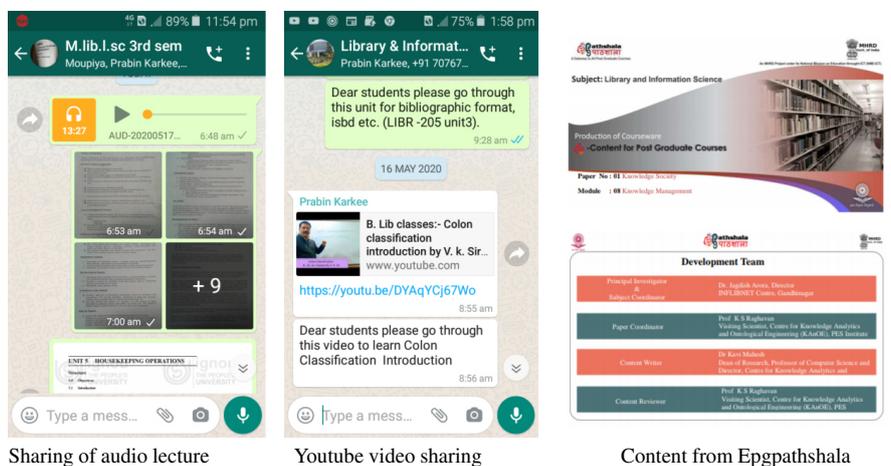
Sharing of audio lecture   Youtube video sharing   Content from Epgpathshala

- Uneasiness while reading contents for a long time from smartphone screen as frequent zooming in and zooming out causes eye strain and fatigue, headache, and sometimes watering from eyes.
- They missed the comfort of holding hard copy of study material.
- Devices with big screen such as laptop, desktop, or tablet could have been better.

In spite of all the difficulties, students are adapting to the new mode of academic activities and appreciated our efforts in these uncertain times.

5. Conclusion

In spite of the advantages of online teaching-learning practices, both faculties as well as students missed the conventional face to face classroom interaction which is believed to be based on a kind of emotional bonding. Moreover, hands-on computer laboratory practices could not be conducted in the present set up. The COVID-19 pandemic with all its ferocity has limited university academic activities to such an extent that time tested practices no more seem viable. As uncertainty looms large, only the future will show us the far reaching effects of adopting new environment of teaching-learning. Till then our fingers are crossed.

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