

**Title:** Learning Online, a student's experience.

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Ayush Alphonso is a young adult of 18 years born and raised in Mumbai. He completed his 12th from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. He is a vivacious reader, plays the keyboard a little, is a trained bathroom singer and spends far too much time on the phone. Ayush finds solace in expressing his feelings of distress and self-identity through art and language. Having completed the foundation year from NIDH, he continues to embark on his journey of formal design education.

The fast paced environment in college is characterized by set timings for every meal you need to consume, 4 hours of uninterrupted sleep before class next day, completing the assignments to the very best of your ability, worrying about your grades, and an anticipation for the arrival of the next weekend. The specification to be in a physical classroom setup, for a number of hours per day, in order to validate your learning, is highly enforced. At home, all I need to do to validate my presence and ‘attend’ class, is a click on a google meet link. The walls of the classroom have disappeared. Now I can eat, roll on the bed, visit the washroom, scroll through Instagram feeds, chat on WhatsApp groups, do absolutely nothing and even sleep, all while simultaneously ‘attending a class’. And this very possibility says so much about how much attention is being given to, for example, a course as integral as Design Process. This calls for every learner to consciously make an effort to separate themselves from the household, mentally and physically as to not get distracted. It has been a challenge to handle household chores thrust upon me by my family members, to participate in the family, to adhere to house rules and timings, all whilst simultaneously going through the physical and mental process that learning design requires. All in all, my participation and interest in the class and the modules has turned out to be way lesser in an online classroom than on campus; in person. However, (on the sole basis of what I've observed and assumptions that may be biased) I can say that for some, it is quite the very opposite. Perhaps it is the very controlled environment of the house wherein you can't drink or smoke, that has led to many of my peers showing active participation whether in discussions or even submissions.

Learning design online may seem like a discussion and analysis of the medium of communication. But more than an online space, it is also about what and whom my physical space is surrounded with. As I have repeatedly heard and have come to agree with as well, we learn “design” through our peers, through the environment that is curated in physical institutions that teach design. As the medium changes, so have these situations. Seated in a chair and table setup for which I have found a corner in my house for, all my classes feel like a solo act. Me, myself, and I. Attempts to video call and work together as a group are made, but with continuous screen time and the sole goal of completion of work, this attempt fell flat. On group calls for team projects it has become easy to simply ignore without feeling guilty, and more so than ever, be a silent observer and not get pulled up for it. During discussions, I often worry about how my comments and inputs will be viewed. Not being able to see reactions and facial expressions, I often feel like I might be judged. Weirdly enough, the atmosphere of 60 cameras switched off, the leisure of remaining silent, the freedom to not initiate conversations has led to an attitude that looks at someone who switches their camera on, who is constantly speaking; who is active, as a suck-up.

When addressed face to face in college, and bombarded with critiques and asked to defend yourself and your work, there is no other option but to stand your ground and sometimes be embarrassed (over time, I've realized that it only helps me learn more than I would, if I'd gotten it right the first time). In an online classroom however, I do not feel obliged to answer nor say anything as I am not physically present. You can't see me, and this invisibility cloak has often

led to me not caring about what I put out as submissions, because if you think about it, what's the worst that could happen? Sadly, I've felt this more often than I like, and many a times I feel as though I can get by, by doing absolutely nothing in class. It is after all, my loss, and it takes a conscious effort to rethink and reassess my actions.

The unavailability of so many of us; hiding behind an icon and a switched-off microphone has made discussions and conversations heavily one-sided; driven by faculties and educators. And as they themselves rightly say, the class feels no less than a webinar or a workshop. As it is with webinars, it often feels like a one-way channel of information being passed along. I do see the attempts made to increase interaction in class and perhaps as we go along further and get more accustomed to the structure and working of online classes, this online experience may only flourish. But there is also a chance that it may only be downhill from here on, with experiences, learnings, and takeaways being hollow, superficial, and lacking practical knowledge.

While learning the design process, the course felt like several challenges were assigned per day, following a discussion that is pushed in a 2-hour slot and the only goal is to get it done and get closer to ending the semester. With the online platform constraints of having one person talk at a time, discussions end up being driven with a single person's outcome and thereby using up all the time available for the day.

In college, all I needed was plain white paper, paints, and the essentials. However when online, frustration ensues due to: heavy rains that tamper with the internet, an outdated version of a laptop and similar devices, lack of sufficient personal space to work in and the need to click pictures that truly capture the quality of the physical work that I've created.

From the first online module in April to the last one for this foundation year concluding in August, I think that the approach of how one addresses learning design on an online platform is of utmost importance. While learning Space, Form and Structure, the faculties made sure to assure us that they understand the situation we are in, that the constraints and shortcomings of an online medium are acknowledged and ways that one can work around it were also shared. Most importantly, they spoke to us about what the intent and expected outcome of the module: as a course and as a step in learning design. And over the course of that 30 min impromptu talk, I could see so many of us shift our approach, shift our mindset, become forthcoming and felt driven to make this online module work.

Something that is drastically different when learning design online is the unavailability of people and faculties throughout the working hours of the day. When a design brief is given online, I've spent the whole day by myself figuring out, as to what I think is right and wrong, carrying out my decisions, only to realize the next morning that this may not quite be expected. This is part of the learning, but the next day, with limited time slots, few works get discussed and new assignments are given and in the process, time and again I am unable to effectively reflect on what actually is being talked about. As it often happens and perhaps is intended, there is a lot of ambiguity and open-endedness when it comes to learning design. When tried online, lack of clarity, assumptions, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and confusion follows suit.

Subsequently, in an online space, the very process of delivering conceptual clarity has often lead to the formation of definite, formulated, stiff, and narrow understandings of any particular idea. When in a physical classroom, ideas bounce around, faculties move about, deeper and richer dialogues are shared and the very nature of a workspace aid in actually ‘learning’ design. On an online platform, with lesser features at hand, the aim is to get the point across. So how does one get an ambiguous, multi-layered, complex phenomena across, with constraints of time and lack of spaces for discussion?

When shifted online, the structure and presentation of a module transforms in a way such that I have been able to find time to address personal interests, personal struggles and anxiety issues, dabble in activities and content outside ‘design education’ and it allows you to simultaneously pursue other interests, just like how any online course aims to be.

I often wonder if I ever need to go back, live a strenuous lifestyle in another city, when I am doing the same thing in my own home. Moreover, I am being assured that I am learning all that I am to learn about design, and that necessary goals are being met. So if an institution agrees to conduct online classes assuring that essential learnings are being delivered, what then becomes the need for physical spaces?

Learning design on-site in college, in the proximity of the campus and surrounded by likeminded people quickly becomes a bubble and a safety net and every so often, unreal. With learning design online, perhaps there is an opportunity to base design learnings and understandings in personal, dynamic contexts that may elevate the comprehension of design concepts and practical knowledge, as well as allow us to grow and develop holistically.

The current situation of covid-19 and the lockdown is supposed to present itself as an opportunity to explore new ways to 'learn'. Can learning design online go from just being a makeshift solution; for completing pending semesters, to an alternate reality of design education? Only time will tell.