

- Title : Questions then and Questions now
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Questions Then, Questions Now

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As I sit to write the paper, my thoughts are clouded from the news of a friend on ventilator. Many thoughts appear and disappear.

After a pause of two days.

I write this paper as the Coordinator, Foundation Program at National Institute of Design, Haryana and I wish to iterate two points that make the journey worth reflecting for myself. The institution is only 3 years old and in the process of setting up and formalizing itself, the dimension of having to shift to online teaching brings in yet another challenge, allows an opportunity to relook, review and makes one confront the set practices. Being the first year, as the name suggests foundation, is the introduction to the fundamentals of design. It is the year of unlearning and learning how to learn in coming years of design education. It is by the end of this year a student begins to appreciate his new journey. The complexity of these two factors fascinated me to undertake the process of embracing online teaching methods with approach discussed later. This paper reflects the journey undertaken through the course of three modules taught online varying in nature from theoretical, studio to design project.

This paper is a journey of the setbacks and determination to keep going, it is a journey of resilience with humility, it is a journey that gave us memories, bitter and sweet, it is a journey that tells the reader that it wasn't all in vain !

Teaching pedagogy in evolving

Driven by hands on, minds on, approach to learning, a walk in the physical spaces would mean students' work display in tandem, group works sprawling into common spaces, materials spilling onto corridors from workshop spaces, access to books, posters of an upcoming event, finding individuals in common spaces. This seemed the only environment in which design education can be delivered.

The intangible interactions in the physical environment complimenting course abstracts was the norm, until March 19, 2020. When the notice of first imposed lockdown was announced, it brought about a shock wave. This shock was twofold- one of the pandemic and the other one of What Next? What will happen to 8 weeks yet to be completed !

It was a week of shock, despair, anxiety, denial in silence, procrastination, and confronting inhibitions around the shift to the only resolve of online classes. While the bigger question was about maximising testing for Covid 19, there was another dilemma. That dilemma was to understand how can design classes be taught, on an online mode ? What shall be the process? How much of it shall be feasible? Are there tools available for design education ? How many subjects can be taught online? What can and cannot be taught online? Would it be conducive for foundation program? Might there be limitations of the medium or advantages was yet to be understood. Would this hinder learning process? These questions were endless.

As a coordinator of the Foundation program, I have always wondered why has the foundation programme at NID not changed? The course abstract that has remained sacrosanct, despite evolving times and technological shift in the design industry, what could be the approach that resonates with current generation. What should change and what should remain as is, is a continuous dialogue in the mind space.

The students are found to be taking notes on mobile as easily as we were on paper, requesting to share reading material in pdfs instead of prints, and submitting presentations made on mobile phones, in the comfort of respective hostel rooms. On certain occasions students had enquired the rationale and reasons for being heavily hands on centric be it observational drawing, drafting geometrical models and analytical grids. Looking at hands-on rigour versus the contrast of being digital savvy generation, the ease with which the student could make videos, take good composition photographs, navigate through software and apps, questions like how this gap could be bridged? How could this disconnect be addressed? Is it desirable? How much of it is desirable? These questions were a part of everyday thinking and evolving pedagogy.

Having no references and benchmarks of what and how to conduct the programme was indeed the challenge and the opportunity. As observed, over a period, when assignments were introduced, the students approached the same in an instructional mode. This was the baggage of thought process that one carried from the school education. For creative field like design,

this was detrimental. The possibility that there can be multiple approach to an assignment, comes across as a discomfoting truth for the young design aspirants.

This was further directed and driven by learning by doing pedagogy. The student began to take onus of their journey. In the physical studio, the intent is to direct a student to explore and engage in the process of inquiry irrespective of the medium. There by leading to, mistakes, awareness, and learning outcomes through reflections. In addition, looking at students' response to monologue, lectures, and presentations by faculty team, this had been reduced to minimum. Modules across the programme followed learning by doing approach to gain conceptual clarity. Rooted in a students observation, and subjectivity in perception, the conceptual clarity was further reinforced through discussions. This allowed every individual to express his point of view and receive a feedback from this fellow mates. Acknowledging each other's point of view, brought in the richness of socio-cultural background that the student pool had. In addition, this indeed was an insightful process for the faculty team as well.

Approach to online education : Intent, content and pedagogic shift

Having undergone online courses for self-appraisal, both on free and paid university program platforms, I was familiar with the format, structure, and approach behind the online courses. While the online platforms facilitates flexibility for the self-paced learning, are driven by the learner. If this was the best approach for foundation students being the formative year, was not very convincing. The idea of being able to create a platform to discuss, debate and critique to gain conceptual clarity was central to pedagogy and an aspiration. As a coordinator, I was not willing to let go of these aspects despite the dire need to shift the mode of delivery to online.

With these thoughts in the mind space, I decided to respond to the challenge with an openness that one does not know enough. All seemed unknown unknowns. Unlike the way one enters the studio with seemingly known unknowns! The awareness of entering unknown zone was embarked with a question- 'we must try, we must try whether design education is even possible online? If yes, in what formats? How does one ensure that the rigour, module content and students learning are not compromised?

On one hand, there were concerns of how much of teaching is possible with online medium, on the other was increasing anxiety around the spread of pandemic. The anxieties and apprehensions of students added to personal anguish.

But...

What we cannot do must not come in the way of what we can do!

Firstly, to understand willingness, series of mock tests on Zoom and Google Meet were conducted post audio and video check with every student. These sessions were anchored to determine the nature of conversation and discussions, each video conference platform was able to provide. This was carried out post gaining confidence within the faculty team for History of Design module, based on the mock tests carried out to familiarise ourselves. With iterations, the last mock test with students ended with chat texts from students “Yes, we can try this for the class”!

While this was reassuring, little did one know, the coming months, would be full of disappointments, frustration, irritation, helplessness and yet the resilience to continue. Despite the series of mocks tests, in between the ongoing module, History of Design (HOD), the batch expressed the frustration of *this is not feeling like the class!*

With that speed breaker, the faculty team expressed and realised we never imagined what an online design studio could be, and what could it look like!

The simple line- What we cannot do must not come in the way of what we can do, became the principle to hold on to, not only for the students but also for faculty team and the self.

The approach adopted further was simple- continuous dialogue with students. This was carried out almost on daily feedback basis, giving us the signal for next day sessions and suggestions on improvisations that could be tried. This helped to understand comforts and discomforts. Smaller groups of students were created so that the group dynamics can be more effective. This also allowed individuals to express their personnel issues hampering comprehension online. In addition, Google Forms for continuous feedback, and a Help Desk was also set up before a module began. The first module, theoretical in nature helped us to try possible permutation combination and take informed decisions for upcoming modules. This resonated with student Ayush Alex as he shared -

“The approach that an educator brings to the table matters immensely. Your outlook first and foremost has to be positive and enriching. Next, that approach has to be instilled and drilled into the heads of your learners via means of dialogue and practice. When one understands that an educator genuinely empathizes and there by present learnings, assignments, coursework, keeping the plight of the student in mind, one feels understood, safe and more

eager to take part in the sessions being conducted. Seems like an educator may have to figure out how to make a digital space feel safe and students voices be heard now more than ever as design as a course is intensive and exhaustive by itself.

Talking icons and frozen videos: Issues and addressal

No eye contact, only voices, uptight, tensed, stressed, wrapping it up in time, regulating who will talk next through chat text, felt very regimental for both faculty and student. This felt contradictory to the intent framed for conceptual clarity for the student. Their expectations kept one willing and wanting to keep trying.

In the absence of no eye contacts, no students on video, it was difficult to gauge the reception of the module. There were some surreal moments when the faculty team found itself almost teaching with no response from students, interjected with crosscheck- “Hello Foundation, are you still here?” My familiarity with the students helped the visiting faculty to have a sense of connect. The voices and the profile picture icons were ingrained in the memory of visiting faculty as the take away.

In the process of exploring the offerings of online mode, the issue of student teacher privacy, resulting in the question of whether to record a session or not had no straight answers. On a lighter note, consciousness in front of the video was hassling, as the gaze is very prominent stark and intimidating. Despite the dilemma, the faculty student interactions were recorded, to counter issues around electricity, less attention span, break in voice due to any other disadvantage that a student might face while the class was being conducted. At this point I would like to share student Ankit’s challenge amongst one of the extreme examples ,

“Internet and electricity problems specially in monsoon , only 4 to 6 hours light available so had to face problem about charge the phone and can't work at night because no electricity, and also have to give a hand to father so have to go to my field and I attended three class at my field and many problems their”.

In case of campus living, the hostel provides uninterrupted space. There are no distractions or expectations around family and household chores. This in turn turned out to be one of the biggest challenges for the students in addition to internet speed. For instance, Alankriti shares

“Having to be diagnosed with migraine, it was very difficult to cope up with the increasing screen time specially during Design Process. First week was very tough and intense. But then soon after having discussions with our coordinator, and myself, I made it a point to not make myself reach the burnout stage after every day's work. But still it's tough to implement than just say. My family environment

since my school days has been very different. It is very difficult to manage the work hours with the family hours. No one understands what kind of commitment this takes and it's sometimes very frustrating to work, but I don't see a very effective solution for this anytime soon. There have been moments where I feel emotionally overwhelmed. Everything personally and educationally gets too much to handle. But then this is what brings an opportunity, to constantly try to keep yourself motivated and enthusiastic. Understanding when I need to give myself space and when can I push myself to work is very important."

"To be honest having a family crisis and working during it was very tough and I was called insensitive but I had to work because of the not very flexible rules for example the attendance and the pressure of submissions on time i really did not overcame any of it but worked my way through it ,

Gunjan (student , foundation)

This led to challenges of late-night routines for completing the assignments and not being able to login for morning sessions. Despite considering a start time from 10:30 am, some helped with household chores until then and others struggled to find a peaceful corner. Some, still in bed and logged in. Long screen hours was the elephant in the room next, had no definite answer as the students dependent on the mobile for online sessions, referring to resources and completing assignments.

In parallel, students having Covid 19 symptoms, having to go for tests, being in quarantine, the stress and anxiety induced by the situation and helplessness around internet, stationery, family issues were other issues in the backdrop. At any given time 15-20 % % of the batch had been in containment zone. As shared by Maneesh : -

The place where I am , I have to work with cheap quality paper because this city (Hoshangabad) is small and no stationary shop has paper and art supplies required for the full fillment of the college assignments.

The emotional burst of stress and anxiety was responded through Richard Bach's novella 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull' that any limitation is all in the mind. From design we moved to bringing in inspiration from philosophy and likes.

The batch was informed that the rigour had to be maintained and self-discipline was needed. Students' morale kept high as their issues were resolved through clear communication and continuous improvements.

Based on the learning from first module, the solution lied in providing flexibility to access module content and compliment the same by creating a platform for student faculty

discussion. The video conferencing platform Google MEET allowed a batch of 60, to discuss and be together. In addition, smaller groups and individuals too could get in touch with the faculty in case of any doubts or concerns. Instead of presentations, the faculty team put together kit of digital resources that the individuals could refer to at any time and bring back their questions for discussions. The combination of google classroom, with assignments in stream allowed the batch to review each other's work and provide feedback. The video conferencing features, allowed the batch to make group presentation, and critique the work in focus. Of course the familiarity from previous module helped in easing out the consciousness around the gaze and the medium.

The combination of google meet for class discussions allowed to partake in discussions, while all the work displayed visually on concept board allowed to view the work visually almost like the softboards with additional facility to zoom in and zoom out. By the end of the third module, as faculty team and students became familiar and had a grip on the digital tools, some of the students expressed *it almost felt like a class!* The thumb rule of min 12 students on video at a time, in rotation, further helped to create a virtual simulation of the studio.

"The interactive nature here has increased, so my behaviour of keeping quiet on online platform decreased" shared Ananya.

Soon the classes became a way to distract from the anxieties of the pandemic. Students remained connected and helped each other through this turbulent journey. As shared by Shivaji -

"It was quite stressful at first but later on, I got used to it and enjoyed the modules with keeping reality of covid-19 in mind. Tackling with stress is all about how we want to deal with it, if we focus more on positive part of scenario... we'll always be stress free and happy"

"No change as such, both courses had their unique approaches, in online mode I feel the courses were able to stand upto 80-90% of what happens in a class room" said another student.

Interestingly, by the end of every module, the audio resonated with ending note- the module was good, had we been on the campus it would have been even better !

When the class had reached a level of acceptance with online learning and teaching, one wondered did the richness of campus life become a hindrance in exploring what the new medium had to offer?

Offerings of the new mode :

“I honestly think that the online medium had presented us with an opportunity to do all the courses in a different way and maybe also explore them on a different tangent, be it SFS, HOD or DP. Over these three modules I've realised that online medium has taken our attention towards context and resources not just as a constraint but also an opportunity.”

Anushka (student , foundation)

As one discovered, Google classroom allowed the faculty and student to continue the dialogue through private comments on chat. This was an additional advantage irrespective of prescribed timings for classes. For a batch size of 60, Google Classroom was efficient in receiving submissions too.

In addition, those with limitations around travelling or family responsibility too could partake in imparting design education as mentors. Not having to travel, turned out to an be advantage and did allow many more teaching resources. This opportunity and resources are yet to be fully realised.

When faculties and students meet in physical space, our minds make a visual judgement. What happens when none of them have a perception about the other? While the medium makes one conscious, it also flattens the hierarchy. The structural hierarchy between a faculty and student is none, providing equal opportunity for all participants to be in audio and video and hence no visual distinction. It remains to be known and measured how helpful this can be in creating safe virtual space.

Also, it is true that the internet provides a plethora of content on a variety of design subjects the content at times, is even better than what a faculty can deliver. In this context, the role of a faculty changes to being a facilitator, from a content provider to an anchor who aids students to navigate through information available and help inferring that in a context.

Students too have undergone a change in the mindset and do acknowledge that the platform indeed has a lot to offer and opens a new way to discover learning. Some of the examples from student responses include :

“I realised that online classes can be enjoyable and not as bad as I imagined, but the only difference is the environment and we have to work alone in our home.”

“The journey from attending HOD to SFS online has been bitter sweet. I believe that discussions online, if given the required energy and dedication, have the potential to be just as insightful as those happening in the physical presence of each other. Though, it is surely a few months away from reaching that stage”

“I think there was a clear change of mind as many modules which we expected that they cannot be done online were very thoroughly catered with the online requirements and it never felt that we missed anything. We were hesitant at first but I think by the end we are more comfortable online than in actual classroom except for the emotional connection we had to the college”

As one navigated through modules one after the other, the economics of design education came to forefront like never before. As realised, due to high faculty to studio ratio, stationery studio modules and material intensive workshops, make it a far-fetched proposition for many in the country financially. While traditional physical studio teaching may continue, the pandemic has pushed us to explore and discover newer ways, newer tools, and methods to explore different ways to facilitate design education online. While issues of scalability loom large due to constraints of infrastructure requirements for design education, the internet can help address the same through disruptive education models. Can this then also become instrumental in making design education reach larger audience and be more equitable?

Conclusion

We have explored the unknown and are constantly comparing it with the comfort of a physical studio. While there is desperation to go back to the old normal, physical spaces, and laughter of hostel corridors, one has come to appreciate the new medium. This has emerged much more promising than anticipated. Having undergone the process, the potential of internet for design education is at a nascent stage, clearer understanding is yet to emerge.

Skills like dexterity of working with hands, dabble with materials skilfully, and to be able to make prototypes are integral towards being a designer. But are they still relevant in the digital era? The improvements in technology to make the medium less intimidating is obviously a desirable one. But how is this new technologically driven approach changing the process of approaching creative process itself. That is a larger question that can probably only be understood as the process evolves and takes form.

Consciousness due to the presence of family members are some of the intangible that cannot be taken for granted. One wonders in case of university programmes, the campus living facilitates safe space for an individual to explore himself or herself. Not all in our country have healthy family ties and for those campus living has been a saving grace.

What is clear is advantages of online education must be combined with on campus learning for the benefit of the learner. On one hand – the talking icons and in between eye contact through hide and seek videos created a sense of connect. Is it human enough or is it the new human, is yet to be understood in coming semesters?

My engagement with online education informs me that it is doable, is it desirable enough is yet to be understood.

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