

A Teacher thinking Aloud

I am not here to write an academic article but to think aloud. As a teacher, I believe, I first need to teach myself. At this moment, the word 'care' is perhaps more important than ever—by 'care' I mean self-care, caring for others – within and outside one's family and caring for future. All these three are inter-connected. This involves a deep sense of responsibility. Now the question is—do we have technology that is effectively responsible? Do we have practitioners of religion who are effectively responsible? Do we have a democratically elected Government that is effectively responsible? Populist leaders may be clueless about economic policies and strategic affairs but they are never lost for words. They are supremely cognizant of the fact that they are always acting. They know how to run the show. But COVID-19 can attack anybody regardless of their status and privilege. Those who are suffering disproportionately from the pandemic are always the vulnerable poor and the minorities .

Won't we understand even now that Nature is no plaything? COVID-19, it seems has sealed the entrance into a post-truth world. This is because there is no room for post-truth in the management of the unforeseen crisis. COVID-19 is trying to teach us every moment that unbiased leadership matters, integrity matters, fact-based news outlets matter. One cannot toy with life and death to satisfy one's own power-position. It is a worldwide medical crisis and here the doctors and medical researchers must have the last word. The doctors can unitedly combat the infodemic. The teachers also have a huge role to play here. We all need to see COVID-19 as a powerful equalizer. This is the perfect time for us to perceive what is more valuable—power or responsibility. How do the poor follow the rules of quarantined stay at home when seven to ten people share an eight by ten space as their dwelling place? Without any source of income during the lockdown, do they have the money to buy masks, soaps and sanitizers? The 'Stay at home' slogan, it is clear, is meant for a certain section of our large population—and it includes almost everything--from online teaching to hand sanitizers. Ironically, we can afford to stay at home mostly at the expense of those that cannot.

Technological advancement can ensure redundancy of labour. The question is what a country like India, which features in the 102nd position in the Global Hunger Index, 2019 (<https://www.globalhungerindex.org/results.html>) has planned to cater to this labouring class during this long stretch of the lockdown? They are neither white-collar nor blue. They are collar-less. We the people of India, who are at present “working from home” take this section of population for granted. The workers who moved out of their own native place to look for some

better chances are certainly the invisible builders of our economy. Their lives are at stake now. Devika could be the daughter of any of these innumerable migrant workers who lost their source of income and staked everything to get back home—hundreds and thousands of miles on feet. Do we know Devika? Many of us don't. On June 2, 2020, I had the shock of my life to learn that a fourteen year old daughter of a Dalit daily wager, a Malappuram girl has burnt herself to death because without TV and smart phone she was unable to cope with the ongoing online classes. The Kerala government decided to take online classes called "First Bell" since schools had to remain closed during the lockdown. Devika could not even complete her suicide note because the pencil was broken. According to her school-teachers, she was an ardent student and besides getting A Grade in school exams she also won the Ayyankali scholarship for her academic performance. Dr. Rekha Raj, a Dalit scholar, says that the digital divide is not just an issue of unavailability of equipment, but this gap is also well rooted in one's caste and class location. As a teacher, for us, a student is always a student with her/his aspiration and weakness. The Indian Constitution, which is the soul of the nation, guarantees Article 14 -18 – the Rights to Equality. The irony is, the people of India never ever have the equal benefit of this right. Here, discrimination is everywhere. To me, Devika is a symbol – a symbol of absolute helplessness in hours of utmost frustration.

The online classes posed problems for both the teachers and students in the initial days. A good many old-school teachers get extremely uncomfortable in going online. While several teachers struggle with online tools, many students face connectivity issues. Many teachers were not even familiar with the features of the video conferencing platforms. On the other hand, students ran out of their daily data allocation midway through the lecture sessions. We as teachers have started reaching our respective students online through various means. While posting study material on the Website or Google Classroom, or taking classes through Zoom, Team Link or Google Meet or whatever, it is mandatory for the teacher to cross-check whether s/he is able to reach the students as a mentor. Of the innumerable shells washed ashore by the receding sea of Life, some stay with us as treasures. The teacher, no matter whether online or in-person becomes significant if her/his teaching method/matter can stay deep in the mind of the students as long lasting treasures. To stay relevant, we need to re-train and re-invent ourselves not just once but many times. As a teacher during the lockdown, I have gradually started perceiving COVID-19 as an eye-opener. No matter who you are and what you are, you have to take precautions against this highly infectious virus. COVID-19 has pushed us to step into an entirely virtual zone not by choice but under compulsion. We feel claustrophobic because of these compulsions. But we all know that the advancement of technology more or less prepared the world population for a condition of social distancing much before COVID-19. We have long been the willing residents of the regime of narcissism and the regime of despair. Life for middle and upper class people has long been reduced to cell phone, TV, Instagram,

Facebook and fast food. Do we have Nature anywhere placed in our regular urban life? Mostly we visit hills or seas, valleys or waterfalls during our vacations. These are seen as mere objects which we view externally from a visitor's angle. We take more interest in clicking selfies and groupies than looking into the spirit of Nature.

We humans grow up with a sense of superiority and believe that our mission is to administrate and govern the Earth. The scientific experimentations and mathematical modelling legitimize the idea of a mechanical Nature. Nature is regarded as a system in which the behavior of each element is explicable by laws. But recent studies claim that the nature of Nature is undergoing a deep and fast change. The earth's biophysical processes have suffered primarily from human impacts. Modern technology isolates Nature and treats it as a reserve to be used as and when required for everyday business of convenience. COVID-19 is a dangerous threat to our technological super-ego. At this juncture a teacher's role, I believe, is to create new knowledge. I have been living this truth through years that a teacher must explore the grey area between true and false, appearance and reality. Corona has locked down our free movements and forcefully made us wear actual masks of different colours and kinds. Though the purpose of wearing an actual mask is to protect us from possible COVID infection, the masks can also cover up our sneers and hide our smirks. We need not maintain a square face or wear plastic smile any longer. Notably, the mask also deprives us of a warm smile, an unfeigned acknowledgement.

Perhaps we all have noticed that our students through the last five years or more have manifested result-phobia much more than examination-phobia. In fact, a majority of them take more interest in cramming than learning. Only a handful of them try to get into the text/ reading material/ lecture. Many shy away from interactive discussions which I prefer more than one way lecturing. I have tried to trace the root of such behavioural pattern. These days their minds are trained to use various apps and tools. They cannot stay focused on a single topic for a long stretch of time. The reason is simple. They are habitually more in touch with today's '*always connected*' world. Even our middle-aged minds often get distracted as our cell phones keep diverting us through its never ending pings. That is why, as a teacher, I love the story-telling mode of teaching-learning process with various anecdotes and intelligible cross-references. This can be practiced both in online classes and actual classes. The students' response encourages me to continue with this mode. One has to deliver, I believe, an interwoven lecture as a whole. This works. The students get less distracted. During this lockdown period, while teaching them Shakespeare's '*Twelfth Night*' or English Romantic poems, Bankimchandra's '*Rajmohan's Wife*' or Mary Shelley's '*Frankenstein*', topical references from their familiar world have derived immediate thought-provoking response from the same students. This provides them with a breathing space amidst the continuous threat of monotony and uncertainty during the lockdown. With endless days under the lockdown, their smart phones are their round the

clock tool mainly to socialize. It is impossible to advise them now even cordially to seek out a calm location of their mind, to stay away from their cell phone at least for some hours. One advantage of online class is that we can continue it so long as the students do not get tired. This can provide the teacher enough space to interact with each student as the bell does not go outside the classroom to put a sudden end to an interactive class when a teacher has to rush out of the classroom only to feel embarrassed at the sight of a respectable colleague earnestly waiting outside the classroom to take a scheduled class.

The lockdown has given immense psychological relief as long as taking classes in room number 12 or 13 is concerned. The teacher, if not insensitive to the rowdiness outside the classroom, has to come out of the class twice, thrice or even more to check the loud movements of different gangs of trouble makers along the corridor. Of them, a few consider themselves more than equal and misuse the corridors year after year without caring for corridor discipline required for the adjacent classes in progress. The noisy students in front of the cheap store, union room, canteen, games room melt together with a common culture of arrogance, uproar and insolence while a teacher puts in maximum effort to deliver a lecture and to involve the students in the learning activity.

It is difficult for that teacher inside the classroom to stamp out stress, to stay calm, productive and focused when the nature of the corridor in our college is no less than a bazaar most of the time. Any person with an academic bent of mind should feel the blessings of peace now while interacting with students from home. But at what cost?

I long for my own class replete with attentive /absentminded /smiling /annoying / eloquent /mischievous /introspective /sleepy eyes. In the class, there is "God's plenty". The private space between the teacher and the students is a cozy comfort zone, liberated from the turmoil right outside the classroom.

When many of my own students did not find Google Classroom comfortable because of slow network and connectivity issues, they could mostly download my recorded lectures on Whatsapp. I asked them to send me their reading responses, their audios/videos on these lockdown days. This is my one to one communication. I learnt from a girl that her father, the only earning member of her family, may lose his job because of the lockdown. In reply, I requested her not to hesitate to inform me if any such mishap occurs. While the parents are getting sacked or are denied their monthly remuneration, we can hardly expect their children to spend their data card on online education. That is why I have made them understand that they should consider that they are saving their regular transport expenses which they can keep aside for future days. All these efforts together have given life to the online classes during the lockdown. Physical distance is definitely a major aberration. But no matter what, a particular syllabus framed by the University can never be the be-all and end-all of our area of activity. All the teachers who knew Devika, the Dalit Malappuram girl could have tried

somehow to contact her personally knowing her social and financial condition. In my second and fourth semester online classes, I have come to know about a few cases who could not access internet. When our college was closed initially for one month on and from 16th March 2020, these students immediately left their Paying-Guest accommodation and returned to their respective homes. I picked out each of them and made them understand the importance of keeping in touch even from their remote places. As a result, they put in some more effort and I got my absent students back to class, mostly. Another instance I would like to share is my experience with a Second Semester student who was poor in verbal communication. I deliberately have avoided the term 'Spoken English' here. During the lockdown, he sincerely kept sending me personal voice clips as I instructed, each of which we discussed later and I hope he is better placed now with his communication skill. This boy gave me immense satisfaction as a teacher during this prolonged phase of staying away from college.

Since space crunch has been a major and regular issue of our college much before COVID 19 emerged and an annexe building seems yet to feature in the list of priorities, my humble suggestion is to plan a blend of actual and virtual class on every alternative day for each department. This may help physical distancing practicable for the unpredictable future days.

One of the major areas of thrust with respect to teaching has been recognized as research. The Higher Education Institutions engage in research and encourage original research initiatives. Research Projects from faculty members across disciplines are invited and funded by various funding agencies. The major focus is on the social outcome of the research thus conducted. Ironically, these times of the pandemic have given rise to an immense need for original research in the area of higher education. It is a challenge to the academicians across all disciplines to come together and brainstorm for ideas that would enable and ensure inclusive education and support to the young learners, because education has never been a concept completely confined to curriculum delivery. Our cultural understanding of the teacher-learner relationship confers upon the teacher the role of the guide as well as the mentor in the true sense of the term.

We get it or not, COVID-19 has been continuously uniting us. Sunday evening's cacophonous clapping and bell-ringing have produced no critical care beds, ventilators, testing kits and other most required health facilities. But COVID-19 itself is Nature's testing kit that measures our fortitude and integrity. When nothing works, we pray and when living humans pray together, people all over the world may get free from the shackles of religious demarcations. At this unique turning point of our life, let us bow down to Nature and be humble. Life gradually seems like a science fiction in the making. Let us not allow technology to hack us.

Online education has its own significance though campus life is always much more alive. In actual life, educational institutions can play a vital role of being exemplary sites of social inclusion.

Online classes cannot totally substitute face to face classes. We haven't yet forgotten the critical time when cashless economy was pushed hard during the demonetization crisis to replace cash transactions. We must take care so that online education cannot secretly become the pro-active Trojan horse smuggled in under pandemic threats to withdraw the state's responsibility toward actual education.

I remind myself of Socrates: "I cannot teach anybody anything; I can only make them think."

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