**A Pedagogy for the Digital Commons: Thoughts on the E-learning Conundrum**

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This text is an attempt at positioning debates around digital or e-learning platforms for pedagogy within the broader context of the question of the commons. Propositional in character, the observations made here are partially based on my engagement with such platforms, along with broader observations on the field of knowledge production, without claiming any expertise in the subject under discussion.

**Learning Technologies, Technologies of Learning**

For over a decade, I have used various e-resources in classroom lectures and discussions, as well as for circulating study-materials among students. But it is only two years since I have engaged with a properly designed e-learning platform. The immediate context of my exposure with such a platform was a faculty development workshop conducted in the university where I teach. Like all the 25-odd participants of the workshop, I was not only sceptical but often antagonistic to such modes of teaching and learning. The resistance, at least to my mind, stems from a deep-seated suspicion of the possible misuse of these platforms by the State. It is no secret that governments world over are rapidly withdrawing from infrastructural support and funding of public educational systems under various pretexts. Many workshop participants also foregrounded the possibility that the State may use these online platforms as substitutes for an already shrinking institutional model, and withdraw further from infrastructural and operational investments in education.

This is without doubt a legitimate and grave concern, but attributing or equating state withdrawal of budgetary allocation for education to the rise of online platforms may foreclose our ability to think about the possibilities that such technological mediations open up. Worse still, such a position may produce the blanket impression that existing institutional structures are inherently good as they are. However, I think we can all agree that such assessments are far from the truth. The public higher educational system in India suffers not only from increasing budgetary cuts but equally from the exclusionary nature of the pedagogical models and designs that they espouse. In fact, it is precisely the centralised instructional designs (that are often redundant and reactionary in character) as well as the emphatic lack of vision that has reduced education to becoming an instrument of the production of a skilled labour force. This in turn is irreparably damaging to the emancipatory potential of education as such, with classrooms and laboratories often becoming centres of outmoded learning.

**The Access Question Revisited**

In the context of the digital economy and specifically e-learning, the question of access is being heavily debated, but is often reduced to the availability of technical apparatuses, which while instrumental, does disservice to the debate. To begin with, the question of access is not the sole prerogative of the digital domain alone. It is still very much a contentious issue within existing physical infrastructures of education, where debates so far continue to focus on quantity and not quality. Furthermore, in the context of digital technology in India, most people who have material possession of, or physical access to these gadgets often use them only for a limited purpose. For instance, the professional use of technologies is largely determined by the nature of work by labourers in aggregate service economies, where knowledge is defined more as a means to an end.

In short, the question of access needs to be pushed out of the comfort zone of functionality and thrust into the muddy waters of the redistribution of social capital. The primary role of any form of education is to distribute the social capital in an equitable manner so that the rules of the games are not entirely tilted towards the privileged. After all, this was the core principle of modern and democratic forms of education. In fact, education was imagined as a crucial social equaliser, enabling distributive justice. Even after seventy odd years of affirmative action policies, we know that educational capital in India continues to be largely monopolised by members of the upper caste groups. My proposition is that in this post-industrial world, subaltern social groups would benefit immensely from the exposure to creative and productive use of digital technologies. What we need is a pedagogic vision which will provide the academic community with effective skill sets in the digital domain as well as leisure to experiment.

What we also need are sustained critiques, and propositions that offer a re-visioning and redesigning of the very infrastructure of education and pedagogy itself. The dominant critique of e-learning and the looming fear of state-control and surveillance often overlook the oppressive and exclusionary structure of the existing system of pedagogy. In fact, we often find uncritical espousal and glorification of the existing structures and status quo. My proposition is that while we need to be cautious about institutional/statist hidden agendas and organise ourselves against any form of imposition, it is equally important to think about possibilities that the digital offers us beyond the statist framework. Similarly, while we need to be cautious of blanket implementation of e-learning by the State keeping in mind the digital infrastructural inequalities that often hinder access, questions of access or infrastructural lacunae are not necessarily restricted to any particular mode of teaching. Rather, these are reflective of a general apathy of the governmental mechanism towards the under/less-privileged. Colluding the possibilities offered by e-learning with our struggle for the better implementation of infrastructures may hinder a productive engagement with the larger question of the digital commons. In short, we need to look beyond technophobia on the one hand, and statist phantasms on the other.

**Decentring Classrooms, Delinking the Nation**

Taking a cue from my own limited experiment with e-platforms like Moodle or Google Classroom, and general research around the question of the digital commons, my first proposition is that digital platforms can enhance the non-vertical organisational imagination of the classroom. Majoritarian (or statist) conceptualisations of the vertical structuration of classrooms stem from organisational principles rooted in an arborescent structural articulation. In this normative framework, classrooms are architectonically imagined as centres (and a unique source) of knowledge transmission. After Foucault, we are alert to how modern classrooms are spatially organised as vertical hierarchical structures, akin to factories and prisons. In this structure of knowledge transmission, similar to the traditional order, the teacher is imagined as the purveyor of knowledge and the sole centre from whom all transmission radiates. A critique and reimagination of such a framework is important, particularly given the fact that the modern notion of the teacher was meant to be a departure from the conventional belief of the teacher as the sole source/possessor of knowledge. Such a conceptual framework of the role of the teacher (guru) and function of education, which has a brahmanical lineage in the context of India, constitutes not only a metaphysical notion of the ideal teacher but also defines who occupies the location of the deserving student/learner.

In that sense, India’s national educational philosophy, its policies, and various institutional manifestations are clear indicators of the way in which the nation-state has reformed itself as the modern beholder of these majoritarian values. This is evident, both in terms of who occupies almost all of the pivotal roles in the transmission of knowledge, as well as who defines what constitutes the ideal curriculum for the nation. Needless to say in such an organisational matrix, the role of education is largely confined to producing a unitary notion of the citizen-subject and to prepare skilled and disciplined reserves of a labour class, mindlessly serving the interest of the capitalist class. A detailed analysis of this historical trajectory isnecessary and urgent.

**The Deindividuation Paradigm**

Keeping in mind these historical as well as structural anomalies, we need to reconceptualise classrooms as active spaces of knowledge production, where the role of teacher is further externalised and redefined more as a facilitator of knowledge. In the last two years I developed two courses on an e-platform, Moodle, using the training that I received in the faculty development workshop. Initially, what fascinated me the most was a superior system of organisation that it provides to the course structure, readings, and other materials. The navigability of the virtual domain, we must recognise, produces much more agility and cohesiveness to the overall structures, and on an experiential level it offers more possibilities of inter-linkages with course objectives and outcomes, various course modules, instructional designs, multiple resources, assessment modalities, and so on. Often, the very act of organising the course material can provide insights into newer possibilities and latent/unexplored potentials of the course itself. In that sense such platforms provide greater possibilities of externalization of the courses in terms of their structure and facilitate certain de-individuation in terms of instructional design.

One of the most significant aspects of the coherence such platforms provide is that of the adaptive character of the very structure itself. In fact, they carry the potential to work like porous structures that enable certain deterritorialisation of knowledge. This aspect is enhanced through the constructive, collaborative, and interactive possibilities the design offers, which can be used in more student-centric and theme-focussed interactions and discussions. For instance, the course structure itself can act as a resource pool that is actively built by the students/participants. Peer-learning is widely acknowledged as a crucial part of education but often remains an elusive category. This is because such forms of learning, due to their informal nature and lack of instrumentality are not considered as useful knowledge. At the same time we have to acknowledge that peer-learning is not transparent or value-neutral and is often constrained by differential access to forms of capital. However, the virtual domain does at times help students to embody the intensities of learning experiences because of the divergent modes of engagement it offers. It provides certain expressive equity since such embodiment happens in the interstices of presence and absence, authorship and anonymity, individual and the collective, private and the public, and so on. In that sense, commonly used notions in educational thinking, such as peer-learning, participation, collaboration, attentiveness, etc., can acquire a different potential in the e-learning process.

**(Re)Production of the Commons**

This leads us to think about e-learning more in terms of its qualitative dimension and the possible ways in which it enhances the production and distribution of the commons.

Two immediate concerns within the context of institutional structures are:

1) To collectively conceptualise e-learning as an extension of existing physical classroom learning, and not as substitute/replacement of it.

2) To develop the possibilities of e-learning platforms or re-design these platforms in order to create value-added courses within institutional structures.

At the same time it is important to develop these e-learning platforms as counter-institutional sites. These platforms can be collectively developed to offer alternative learning possibilities. This is all the more significant in the context of the humanities and social sciences. As we know, most of the state education curriculums offer grand narratives of the nation, or the nation has primacy in terms of how materials/contents of these disciplines are organised. A non-state, open-ended, and choice-based system can nurture studies on minor histories, theoretical/knowledge traditions, political theories, and so on. The circulation and access of properly conceptualised and designed courses to the learning communities will in fact produce immense pressure on the institutional structures to revise their outmoded programmes and courses. For the learning community, such access will provide possibilities of enhancing their ambits without over reliance on the State. The important point here is that we need to use these e-learning platforms for the enhancement of the counter-culture of learning where minor histories need not endlessly wait before the law to enter the *agraharas* of knowledge.

In common parlance, discussions around the democratisation of knowledge are often solely premised upon a given understanding of the quantitative dimension of distribution (of knowledge). In the context of the digital world, most of us agree that they provide more access to information and various domains of knowledge. The democratising impulse in terms of distribution of resources is largely ascribed to the basic structure and design of the digital economy. This aspect is crucial since the very efficacy of its operation is based on greater access and circulation. Political philosophers like Negri and Hardt, for instance, have used this inherent aspect of the world of the digital in order to delineate the character of the post-industrial mode of production. For instance, in the post-industrial world of the immaterial or biopolitical order, notions such as work and non-work, home and workplace, inside and outside, and so on, have acquired a new semantic and sensorial dimension.

I evoke these debates around the characteristics of post-industrial mode of production to discuss the way they alter notions regarding the commons. Any discussion regarding the prevalence of e-learning needs to be located within the question of the commons. My proposition here is that there is a qualitative shift in the way in which we think about property and ownership, thereby the commons in our time. While industrial order and material commodities operate through the logic of scarcity and exclusion, immaterial products such as information, ideas, or images do not operate through the same logic. In fact, the obverse is true here—in order for them to be productive, sharing is a necessity. Their value increases or decreases according to the rate at which they are shared. To a certain extent, we have to reiterate the fact that unlike material objects, commodities, or properties where the ‘owner’ can prevent use, such exclusion is not possible with immaterials like ideas or images. Only by standing-in as a temporary source of producing more ideas and more images in an endless chain of sourcing and creating, do they become productive. In that sense, in the case of immaterials, there is a dual relation with the commons—as basis and result. Politics begins not only with distribution but also with the production of the commons—that is, the production and reproduction of social relations and forms of life.

While most discourse around politics is structured on the distribution of the commons, the post-industrial world necessitates a rethinking in terms of the production and reproduction of the commons. This is the context in which we need to think about pedagogic initiatives mediated through digital technology as a crucial element in the production of knowledge. One of the disabling features of our current educational model, particularly in terms of programme and course design, is the centralization of this process and over-dependence on the State. This can be modified and/or challenged through e-learning modes. We need to develop multi-fold strategies to deal with this, both, in terms of institutional critiques and counter-institutional imaginations.