Teaching during COVID- 19 pandemic in India: an interpretive phenomenological analysis of faculty's perceptions and experiences

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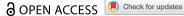
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ABSTRACT

Pedagogical research during the Covid-19 pandemic initially focused on emergency remote teaching and subsequently shifted its focus to instructional design, student engagement, and teacher competencies. Existing research in the area highlights the need to go beyond an instrumental approach for e-learning to be truly effective. This includes examining critical factors such as power and control, the rationale behind decision-making processes, and accountability in educational policies in the context of e-learning. In an attempt to understand the mechanisms through which these critical factors influence remote teaching, the current paper employs an interpretative phenomenological lens to analyse subjective experiences of teaching online during the pandemic. Experiences particular to pre-pandemic teaching, transitioning to online teaching, and adapting to the new "normal" were explored. The overarching themes included the role of training/technical support, the need for enhancing student engagement, grading and assessment policies, the validity of online assessments, and optimal work-life balance. The uncertainty that the pandemic brought is far from resolved and there are still speculations regarding the resurgence of newer variants of COVID-19 and its repercussions on the education sector. The results of the study emphasise the fact that academicians are not just service providers but also end-users in online education. The findings will enable policymakers to reformulate decisions and guidelines in light of these dual roles, thereby addressing the needs and concerns of academicians more efficiently.

COVID-19 has impacted higher education across the globe and India has been no exception. A staggering 320 million learners in India were affected. Educational institutes across India were closed on 16 March 2020 (Jena 2020) and were compelled to adopt a flexible approach to maintain continuity in education almost overnight. A prerequisite for enabling such flexibility is to have established Information Technology (IT) infrastructure, systemic guidelines, and procedures that allow for smooth and efficient transitioning between various modes of teaching which include hybrid, blended, and full-fledged online learning. 60% of higher education institutions in India are in rural areas with no established IT infrastructure. Only a few top universities like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT),

and the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) were offering fully online or hybrid courses before the pandemic (Mukherjee, Belousova, and Maun 2021, 202). Most other higher education institutions were ill-prepared for this transition because of the scarcity of IT resources and lack of prior experience (Chakraborty et al. 2020). Huge differences in terms of tackling the change were also seen between public and private universities. Private universities did have established learning-based management systems but they mostly were limited to sharing learning material and uploading assignments online. Being dependent on student fees, they had to devise ways to quickly make the transition to online teaching to accommodate their learning needs. The availability of funds made the transition easier for them. The transition was onerous for public universities that are completely dependent on government funding. In the absence of infrastructure, basic facilities like electricity, space for learning, and digital devices made the transition particularly difficult. Digital learning or online 'crisis learning' (OCL) highlights the long-standing digital divide (Adnan and Anwar 2020, 46; Pace, Pettit, and Barker 2020, 9; World Economic Forum 2020).

Key stakeholders involved in the transitioning phase are academicians who are required to acquire the skills, knowledge, and competency in Edu-tech pedagogy. This involves employing creative strategies to customise their subject content and align it with appropriate Edu-tech tools to achieve proposed learning outcomes. Academicians take on the role of a learner and then apply that learning through pedagogical strategies used in virtual classrooms. Therefore, there is a need for policy-makers to acknowledge academicians both as service providers and end-users.

A literature review of online pedagogical practices conducted by Carrillo and Flores (2020) highlighted the need for a holistic view of online education. They emphasise the need to move beyond content-driven approaches that focus on social, cognitive, and teaching presence to a more reflective and critical process of examining the implementation of these strategies in terms of issues of power and control, accountability, and autonomy.

Most studies related to perceptions about online teaching have been in the western context (Carrillo and Flores 2020) and do not capture the reality of a non-homogenous, resource-limited, developing country like India.

Subjective experiences are important in understanding how human factors such as motivation to change or adapt, cultural conditioning, persistence in the face of uncertainty, peer support, job satisfaction, and organisational culture play a substantial role in effective policy formulation, implementation, and follow-up. The current study aims to address these lacunae by analysing academicians' perceptions and experiences of teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic through an interpretative phenomenological lens.

Methods

The process of constructive alignment between teaching, learning, and assessment was contextualised to the e-learning environment during the pandemic. This process of transformation brought with it subjective experiences that were best understood within an interpretative phenomenological research paradigm because of its emphasis upon the lived experience of individuals, acknowledging their unique experiences, thoughts, perceptions, and feelings associated with shared phenomena of adapting to a rapidly evolving educational needs during the pandemic.

Sample and recruitment

Purposive sampling was used for recruitment. The inclusion criteria were as follows: the participants had to be teaching in a higher education institute (post-senior secondary education), with experience teaching both before and during the pandemic. Out of 15 people who met the inclusion criteria, 7 agreed to participate and 8 refused participation. The reasons for refusal were: lack of time (n = 6), and unreachable after the first point of contact (n = 2). The demographic details of the participants are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Discipline/ Subject taught	Total years of teaching	Designation	Education level	Institutional affiliation
P1	Female	38	English literature	13	Assistant professor	PhD	Government aided (North)
P2	Female	53	Chemistry	16+	Assistant professor	MSc, M.Phil.	Government aided institution (North)
P3	Male	32	Mechanical Engineering	7+	Assistant professor	M.Tech PhD (pursuing)	Government institution (North)
P4	Male	34	Social Work	7	Assistant Professor	MSW, M.Phil., PhD (pursuing)	Private institution (South)
P5	Female	31	Psychology	8	Assistant professor	PhD	Private institution (South)
P6	Female	33	Psychology	4	Assistant professor	PhD	Private institution (South)
P7	Female	34	Psychology	3	Assistant professor	PhD	Private institution (North)

Tools of data collection

Socio-demographic information sheet

Socio-demographic information related to demographic details which included participant characteristics was collected (Table 1).

The in-depth interview guide

An In-Depth Interview (IDI) Guide was created based on Kurt Lewin's change model (as cited in Mathew et al. 2022) which indicates three stages of organisational change; unfreezing, movement, and refreezing. The unfreezing stage refers to the pre-transition, movement refers to the transitional period and lastly refreezing refers to post- transition phase in online teaching. In addition, the questions for the IDI were framed using a conceptual framework that drew upon a literature review and formative research to identify factors related to online teaching. Our participants taught diverse subjects; however, this did not intervene in the primary purpose of the study which was to understand the generic processes involved in customising pedagogical methods to the learning requirements during the pandemic. To ensure adherence to the aim of the study, questions were framed in a holistic manner that highlighted macro elements of the transition process. To elicit rich descriptive data, open-ended questions were constructed keeping in mind the interpretative phenomenological paradigm which explores subjective experiences of teaching in the participants' unique professional environment. The questions were constructed with an emphasis on perceptions, reflections, interpretations, and understanding of the various factors that influenced this dynamic process during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereafter, the IDI guide was shared with two academicians with experience in educational research for expert validation.

Procedure

An information fact sheet along with the consent form was emailed to the participants before the interviews. Participants who met the inclusion criteria and provided informed consent were selected for the study. Keeping in mind the constraints of the pandemic, only two interviews could be conducted face-to-face and the remaining four were conducted telephonically. After sufficient rapport building, socio-demographic details were gathered, following which the interviewers initiated the semi-structured qualitative interview using the IDI guide. Interviews lasted 1–1.5 hours approximately and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher who conducted them.

Data analysis

Guidelines for conducting an interpretative phenomenological analysis as mentioned by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) were followed and reflexive procedures such as bracketing and memoing were

Table 2. Superordinate themes and subordinate themes.

Instructor preparedness for teaching online
Role of training and technical support
Phase-wise approach to training
Autonomy in choice of platform to deliver online classes
Including time for self-paced learning
Willingness to learn
The need for constructive feedback
Support of family members and colleagues
Unpacking the elements of online teaching experience
Technical difficulties faced by students and instructors
Lack of nonverbal feedback
Poor student engagement (Short attention span and declining attendance)
Lack of inclusivity
Teaching effort disproportional to student performance
Difficulty in establishing continuity of reciprocal/ two-way learning between classes
Strict adherence to content related to syllabus only due to time constraints and fatigue levels.
Preparation for online classes took longer
Lack of social interaction among students
Questioning the validity of online assessments
Use of unfair means by students
Inaccuracy of online proctoring partially assisted by AI
Concerns regarding the content and structure of assessments
Contention with regard to grading and evaluation policies
Discontentment with policies and procedures
Dealing with student grievances
Lack of ownership over policies enforced upon faculty by those higher in the hierarchy
Lack of peer support network
Absence of informal peer engagements
Lack of motivation and procrastination in the absence of peer engagement
Enmeshment of boundaries between work and home
Encroachment of personal time
A sense of injustice emanating from not being able to balance work and home-related responsibilities; especially in the case of participants with young children
Negative attitude of the administration towards work from home
Impact on physical and mental health
Disproportionate burden on women working from home
Are graduating students equipped enough to enter the workforce?
Trained in theory but not in practice
Lack of internship opportunities to gain practical exposure
A deficit in learning soft skills such as teamwork and adapting to diverse work-related/ fieldwork settings
Could there be benefits to teaching online?
No time spent on commuting to work
Classroom Management is easier for bigger classes
Picking up on old hobbies
Technology- A blessing in disguise- use of technology to make class interesting
Easier and faster delivery of theoretical content

used to describe the mechanism through which the researcher navigated and made meaning of the data. After multiple readings of the transcribed interviews and simultaneous note-taking, the notes were organised into themes. The relationships between themes were examined and clusters were identified which in turn were organised into superordinate and subordinate themes as listed in the section below (Table 2).

Results

Theme 1: preparedness for teaching online

This theme explores the process of transition from in-person teaching to teaching online. It provides perspective on the role of acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competence required to teach online. Furthermore, it also enquires into the role of policies and programmes at the institutional level.

The willingness to learn, to keep oneself updated and the technical familiarity of family members were some of the personal factors that resulted in smooth transitioning. In addition, initiatives like faculty development programs (FDP) and quality improvement programs (QIP) conducted by their institutions also had a significant positive contribution in empowering participants to teach online.

> We did have the time to mentally adapt to the change that was to happen. We had a QIP which was organized by the academic staff college. It was related to conducting online classes and making those more engaging. We were trained in the tools we could use to give assignments and different methods of assessment. The training made the transition easier. The online mode of teaching started only with the PG classes. After a month the UG classes started and by then, I had gotten used to taking classes online. So, transitioning to UG classes, which are larger, was a little easier. (P5)

Repeated training conducted across various levels within the institution was reportedly useful in developing confidence with the available learning platforms.

> There were different trainings organized at the university, department and cluster levels. So, for each platform we got trained twice or thrice. That gave us clarity. (P4)

A phased-out approach to familiarising faculty with screen sharing and video call platforms was introduced in a non-teaching environment (such as conducting student admission interviews) which gave ample time to gain confidence and exposure in using these platforms.

> Before starting the online classes, we had 1.5 months of online admission work. That is when we started learning how to use an online platform. Through trial and error in scheduling admission calls, I learnt to schedule online classes, muting and unmuting, etc. (P6)

There was an appreciation of autonomy provided to the instructors with regard to the choice of the platform they could use for conducting online classes.

> What worked in my favor was the freedom that they gave to use any platform. And thankfully Google meet is very simple to understand and use. (P6)

A sense of confidence was evident amongst those participants who had been given adequate support for developing an online teaching pedagogy. Free access to e-learning platforms such as Coursera was also provided to equip instructors with essential pedagogical knowledge to conduct online classes. However, due to time constraints, it was difficult for them to finish the courses that they had enrolled for.

> Courses related to online teaching were made mandatory. I did finish the mandatory ones but was unable to complete the other courses that I enrolled for. (P5)

Reflecting upon what could have facilitated a smoother transition, a participant stated that the university could have provided them with additional instructional videos on the use of online meeting platforms. The accessibility of such videos would have helped them in self-paced learning at a time convenient to them.

> The opportunity for customizing the pace of learning for individual needs via instructional videos that we could access anytime was not an option. All training sessions were conducted in real-time via virtual live sessions. (P6)

Although technical support, infrastructure, and training were seen as important factors for smooth transitioning among our participants, experiences varied according to the institutional context of the participant which in turn influenced the availability of the above-mentioned factors. The lack of support and encouragement from colleagues and management reportedly demeaned the morale of an instructor affiliated with a government-funded college who was trying to adapt to the changing situation.

> There was no support from colleagues or management. Some of them were not happy that I was taking classes because then they were pressured to take online classes as well. I was frequently asked, 'What is the need of starting something new?' (P1)

Even among participants who worked in institutions where the necessary infrastructure and support existed, concerns over the lack of constructive criticism and micromanagement by seniors were expressed.

> Deprecating comments like, "Ma'am I was listening to some of your classes. You are not engaging enough". were demotivating. (P6)

Theme 2: unpacking elements of the online teaching experience

This theme captures the unique processes involved in the delivery of online classes and how it affects the teaching experience. It tries to understand the academician's perceptions, feelings, and responses to each of the demands that accompanied the process of remote teaching. Across narratives, there was a prevailing sense of discontentment with regard to remote teaching in comparison to teaching in the physical presence of students.

> We were used to the physical nature of classes; meeting the students in the classroom. It was a smoother, happier experience. Like every teacher, I too had my own style of teaching which I enjoyed. (P4)

One of the participants also reported experiencing discomfort because of the unfamiliar act of viewing oneself on camera while teaching.

> I am not a person who is comfortable in front of the camera. So, sitting before the camera, assuming they are listening, was challenging in the beginning. (P5)

Several technical difficulties (bandwidth issues, poor internet connectivity, lack of access to a paid version of an online teaching platform) faced in the delivery of online classes were documented across transcripts. Issues pertaining to recording daily attendance were also highlighted. The following excerpts highlight the nature of problems faced during online classes.

> We are not able to interact in online classes because of bandwidth issues. We ask the students to stay muted otherwise there is an echo. They are asked to unmute themselves only if they face any problems. Out of 60 students, 20–30 students complained about network issues or lack of access to devices. (P2)

A participant belonging to a government institution expressed helplessness and frustration on the lack of financial investment by their institution towards the procurement of the basic infrastructure – essential for this pedagogical shift.

> In the absence of access to a paid version of an online teaching platform, we have no choice but to take a class for only 40 minutes. Sometimes, 40 minutes get over in the middle of the lecture.(P1)

Participants unanimously expressed feeling disconnected from students in the absence of means to gauge non-verbal feedback.

> With respect to teaching during the pre-pandemic phase; there were always immediate ways of gauging if students understood the subject matter based on their mood, attention levels, and/or facial expressions – we changed our teaching strategy accordingly. (P6)

Not all students even in physical classes actively engage in class participation through verbal means. Some communicate their engagement with the learning material through other means like eye contact, taking notes, and giving nonverbal indicators of active listening. Therefore, non-verbal feedback was seen as an integral part of determining if students were able to assimilate the content being discussed. The absence of this left the educator unaware of how to customise the content to meet student requirements.

> I miss the joy of looking at the student's faces while teaching and gauging if they have understood. Because of bandwidth issues, we ask students to turn off their videos. Sometimes I feel that I am teaching a blank screen. (P1)

Non-verbal feedback seemed to be an initial indicator for decisions pertaining to further engagement on a topic using didactic methods of exploration; which acted as a probe for verbal feedback.

Other indicators of student engagement in online classes like – attendance and paying attention in class were reportedly low as compared to a physical medium of teaching. The reasons for low attendance were lack of access to devices and data packs, and rules allowing non-mandatory attendance.

> When we started with the online classes, students were attentive, then slowly fatigue started setting in. (P5)

There was a difference in the socioeconomic status of students attending government-funded institutions versus private institutions where tuition costs at the latter greatly exceeded those charged by the former. Hence, students attending private universities largely belonged to a privileged background with the means to afford devices essential for remote learning and lived in residential areas with better access to internet services.

> Lack of inclusivity is a major drawback. Whoever comes to a physical campus, has equal access to classes and study material. Whereas, not having access to devices and data has led to an exclusion rendering a certain section of the student body unable to attend online classes. (P1)

Online classes did not facilitate those impromptu but significant classroom discussions that evolve into opportunities for thinking beyond the limits of the syllabi and connecting knowledge to areas beyond the scope of the classroom.

> In online classes, students are unable to grasp multiple topics at a time as a result of which we end up delivering only one concept or closely related concepts within the space of a class. (P4)

The difficulty experienced by students in recalling or drawing connections from the previous class to the current one was also highlighted as a marked difference between the two modes of teaching.

> The advantage of physical classrooms is that the teacher can relate to students better just by their mere physical presence. It directly impacts students' attention and engagement with the topics taught. This in turn helps in retention of the course content and makes it easier to draw connections to concepts from previous classes. (P4)

Social interaction, which is the linchpin of traditional classroom teaching, is missing in the online mode. The interaction between an educator and their students, and those between students is a source of motivation, learning, and overall development of a student's growth. Lack of social interaction with peers led to isolation.

> Lecture-based studies are not the sole motive of the University experience for students. Meeting the educator in person and clarifying doubts, is a personalised experience. Interaction among students builds an understanding through social exchange which is relevant for their overall development. This peer-based learning was considerably reduced in the online mode. (P3)

Experience of teaching the same syllabus using technology as part of their day-to-day teaching had made it simpler for private institution teachers and hence their learning curve was not as steep as those of government institutions teachers whose initial tryst with using technology to teach online began during the pandemic. The new mode posed new challenges of passive engagement, as a result of which collation and preparation of the same content now took much longer considering the need for effectively communicating the same virtually.

> Before the pandemic, we used to go to class and take lectures using chalk and blackboard and sometimes a PPT. But now we have to prepare a PPT every day as we can't just keep lecturing online. I even prepared YouTube lectures which were very time-consuming as compared to the pre-Pandemic classes. (P1)

They also expressed disappointment because of the disproportionality between the time and effort put into teaching online versus the achievement of learning outcomes as measured through remote assessment procedures.

> When the answer scripts were given to us for correction, I could not believe myself. 50% of the students had not understood the concepts despite the amount of time spent explaining them. In physical classes after explaining the concepts 2–4 times, most of the students could grasp them, with the exception of 2–5%. (P4)

Among the various options available to educators, some screen-sharing platforms were preferred over others because of factors like ease of taking attendance, amount of bandwidth consumption, user-friendly interface, and security/privacy issues.

> Initially we were trained in Google Meet. But due to the limitations in the number of attendees and recording the lectures, WebEx was adopted but it consumed extra data. Since most of our students relied on mobile data for their classes, attending two to three classes in a day was difficult. So, I moved back to google meet. (P4)

> I did not like the WebEx interface as it was very complicated. Since we were given the option to use any platform, I used Google meet as it was easier. (P6)

> Despite security concerns with zoom, we continued to use it as it was the most convenient platform. (P1)

Theme 3: questioning the validity of online assessments

Online assessments were an avenue that only private institutions could explore as most government-funded institutions lacked the infrastructure, technical expertise, and budget to meet the expenses that they entailed. This theme explored the crisis of confidence associated with the administration of online examinations. There was a lot of contention regarding the need for conducting online examinations during the pandemic and various student protests were organised. A sense of helplessness was reflected in the instructor's perspective on the matter.

> I felt there was no other alternative. If there was, we could have put the blame on the university. (P6)

Some participants were of the opinion that the assessment was not designed keeping in mind their specific discipline. There was concern regarding word limits imposed for each question on the testing portal, as instructors felt that students were not accustomed to writing concisely within a strict word limit specifically during a timed online examination.

> In social work when we ask students to write an answer in 150 – 300 words, they may not be able to write concisely as they have thus far been trained to write detailed experiential-based accounts. This inability to explain properly while adhering to a strict word limit leads to poor grades. (P4)

Some of our participants reported the use of an online testing portal that uses artificial intelligence guided online proctoring of exams. Invigilating proctors were not visible to students although the student knew that they were being watched. These participants reported that there was a palpable sense of anxiety amongst students when they initially navigated the portal.

> They were worried because they were not sure what was happening. They only knew someone was watching them, and once in a while they got messages (in the chat box from the proctor). (P5)

Students who navigated the portal once were aware of the human-enabled proctoring capacity of the software and hence were mindful of their activities. The proctor received red or orange flags depending on the degree of suspicious activity (such as presence of another person in the room or opening a new tab) from the system. Proctors would then communicate with the student via the chat box. Despite these measures, there was still uncertainty regarding the authenticity of student performance as stated below

> The platform we used was guided by artificial intelligence. Once students gained familiarity, they knew how to overcome limitations by deceiving the platform. Computer Science students even managed to circumvent the process by successfully opening new tabs while logging into the testing portal without the AI identifying any suspicious activity. (P4)

> Online exams were just a hogwash because students were engaging in unfair means like cheating, putting sticky notes on the wall. (P6)

Theme 4: contention regarding grading and evaluation policies

There was a certain degree of disapproval of the grading and evaluation policies, and a feeling of helplessness was expressed given their lack of autonomy. These were explicitly communicated. While there was a pressure to pass students, which was subtly implied, percentile distribution of student scores was restricted to a pre-determined ratio to give an impression of maintaining an academically rigorous assessment process. Compliance with these policies proved to be arduous for some participants as they were expected to take personal ownership of the consequences of implementing institutional decisions.

> I felt really controlled and manipulated by the authorities as they put a cap on the maximum marks, we could give to students in their assignment without having a discussion about it with the teachers. They complained that we were too lenient in evaluation and needed to be unduly strict. I felt it was very unjust to the students who did very well in their assignments. In fact, we were told to take complete responsibility for the consequences of the same. This was the most difficult to do as the students held us accountable for their low grades and questioned us. (P 6)

Policy-making processes were unilateral and left no space for dialogue.

> But my conscience knows that I was wrong and that the students deserved more marks than what I gave them. It made me feel so helpless! (P6)

Some guidelines like treating students with empathy and compassion were subtly implied. These required the faculty members to be lenient in dealing with students' affairs, such as late submissions, poor attendance, etc.

> We weren't explicitly told that we needed to give them attendance. Instead, we were told to take care of student grievances, on account of network, power failures, etc., while marking attendance. It's right that we need to be compassionate, but this was too lenient. Some students used it as an opportunity for absenteeism. Students presumed that just by appearing in the exam, they would automatically pass. (P4)

Theme 5: lack of a support network and peer engagement

This theme discusses the breakdown of the informal support and peer exchange systems at work. It also aims to understand the various functions it served, and how its absence had an impact on the overall teaching or work-related experience.

> A cabin/workstation makes it easier to concentrate on work, as there is an awareness of it being a coworking space. As I tend to procrastinate, I need that kind of push and frequent exchange with colleagues in order to meet deadlines. This is an impossibility in online mode. (P4)

Despite seeing their struggles as a collective situation, the choice to navigate it was an isolated one for some participants.

> Everyone was in the same boat. I don't think I have asked anyone for any help because there was nobody to help me. (P6)

Theme 6: enmeshment of boundaries between work and home

This theme examines work-life balance. It also aimed to understand how our participants navigated this territory and its impact on their daily life.

Participants with young children were especially affected. They expressed a sense of injustice to both work and home where multitasking was associated with reduced efficiency and lack of satisfaction on both fronts.

> When working from home, as my physical presence is felt, there is an expectation to cater to domestic chores simultaneously. Being a young father, I feel the need to attend to my child as well. I end up spending extra time with the child even during work hours. However, one escapes such distractions in an office environment. I prefer working from a workstation as it enables me to keep the work and home fronts delineated. (P4)

For some participants, working from home was advantageous as it offered them the flexibility to switch between work and home demands as per requirement.

> In the beginning, it was very difficult to adapt. However, over time, I realized that I can work at my convenience. I can conduct a scheduled 2-hour class, and plan the rest of the work around my chores at home (P6)

Participants expressed resentment against the imposition of work-related demands on their personal time. This impacted their physical activity, leisure, and recreation opportunities at the individual and family levels.

> Mandatory webinars and Coursera courses added to the previously assigned administrative tasks. These were conducted late in the evenings when I prefer to engage in recreational/ physical activities. So, it affected my family and me. (P4)

Constant work-related communication via phone and text messages also acted as a stressor for the educators.

> There were constant messages always tagged as very important. I had to keep checking my phone and emails. It was quite stressful! (P6)

There was pressure to respond as soon as possible and no guidelines that indicated specific working hours.

> Once I was provided with a list of students at 11 p.m. and asked to set up interview calls for them at 8:00 the next morning. That was very difficult, as I had to learn how to do it by watching videos from 1:00 to 2 a.m. While I was still being simultaneously bombarded with messages in the department WhatsApp group being directed to check mails and respond to messages. (P6)

> It was assumed that working online was like a holiday. Upon requesting for one we were asked about the need for a holiday while already being on one! Initially, I felt obligated to respond to queries immediately, despite the hour. But eventually I realized how this was not sustainable. (P4)

Apart from the psychological distress, the long working hours also took a toll on the physical health of our participants and in some cases exacerbated already existing conditions.

> I was already experiencing dry eyes and during the pandemic we were screen bound to meet academic needs. That actually led to other health issues'. (P4)

> I started sleeping around 2–2:30 am because I got time to prepare for my classes only at night. (P6)

Women participants reported taking on the major share of responsibility related to domestic tasks along with their professional duties.

> My husband and I are both working from home. I am also cooking, teaching my children, helping them with their homework, but my husband is just working from home. Although I am fortunate to be in a family that believes in sharing the load, yet the household chores ultimately come down to women. I reached a point of a nervous breakdown. (P1)

Theme 7: are graduating students equipped enough to enter the workforce?

Different subjects use different pedagogical strategies to meet their learning outcomes. Some of the strategies were difficult to employ in the context of the pandemic. Subjects like Social Work and mechanical engineering required fieldwork exposure and hands-on training, unlike English literature which is more theoretical in nature. This theme explores future concerns of educators related to online teaching, and how it relates to the overall preparedness of final-year post-graduate students about to join the workforce.

> In social work, we have a 60–40 curriculum where 40% is largely field work internship. Due to the pandemic, fieldwork has been on hold. Online Internships do not provide the practical skills that one acquires during fieldwork. Another integral part of social work training, rural practicum – which includes exposure to community living, working with groups, peer learning, and team spirit was also compromised as the pandemic left no opportunity for these to be organised. (P4)

> The alternative instructional videos used in mechanical engineering (moulding, welding, making metal from raw material) cannot compensate for the hands-on experience in the workshop. Similarly, mechanical drawing with a scale in online classes is nowhere close to the accuracy obtained when using a drafter. (P3)

Theme 8: could there be benefits to teaching online?

This theme uncovers aspects of remote teaching that were considered beneficial. Universities where infrastructure and technical constraints limited instructors from using technology in the classroom earlier, such as showing video clips, projecting a presentation or screening movies etc., had to provide the instructors the autonomy to engage with students at their own behest.

> Online classes opened several options, we had access to kahoot quizzes, PPTs, videos and discussions. In an offline setup, arranging a projector and a seminar room was a herculean task! (P1)

In some institutions, especially with large classes, online teaching had the advantage – wherein classroom management was under control and saved time and effort.

> I find teaching enjoyable, however, disciplining UG classes, with a strength of 85 students, is a challenge. I feel online teaching is disruption free. Everyone is on mute, and I can ask questions and make sure that they are paying attention. (P6)

One of the benefits of online teaching elicited by participants was the faster coverage of syllabus. Online classes proved to be a boon for subjects like chemistry and mechanical engineering involving a lot of blackboard writing in the theory part. The teachers did end up spending extra time preparing for the lectures. But once the lectures were prepared, content delivery became easier.

> Although I spend 5–6 hours a day preparing for the lecture, the content is delivered 1.5 times faster in online mode as the material is already prepared and we just have to explain it. A lot of time previously spent on writing on the board is saved. (P2)

Among the indirect benefits mentioned were the reduction in commuting time, and increased time to rest, reviving old hobbies, and more time with the family.

> Comparatively I get more leisure time and time with my family as I do not have to travel to my workplace. (P5)

> Life had become hackneyed. My reading was facing a big slump. This period was a refreshing change for me. I have picked up my reading hobby again. (P1)

Discussion

A discussion of eight superordinate themes derived from participant interviews is given below:

Theme 1: preparedness for teaching online

There was significant variation in the level of preparedness for teaching online and various contributing factors were identified. They included the type of the institution (private versus government), prior experience with blended learning, technical training, and infrastructural support available. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) in their review of the educational process during the pandemic noted that professional development and training are imperative for educators in order to sufficiently equip themselves for transitioning to online teaching. Apart from infrastructural and technical support, the role of teacher encouragement, the need for constructive criticism and policies that uplift morale, and acknowledging the challenges of teaching virtually were also emphasised by our participants. A study conducted by Denisova et al. (2020) on subjective discomfort among teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that 48% of university teachers showed moderate to high levels of stress and about 60% experienced a decrease in motivation for professional activity during the transition to working remotely. These findings add impetus to the need for constructive criticism and encouragement during a phase of rapid transition as voiced by our participants. While there is a need for institutions to recognise the immense demands of learning and adaptation placed on educators, there also exists data to suggest that personal factors such as personality traits, a growth versus fixed mindset also influence how educators respond to these challenges (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Denisova et al. 2020).

Theme 2: unpacking the elements of online teaching experience

Discomfort and dissatisfaction with online teaching were observed amongst our participants. An Egyptian study that analysed medical educators' experiences during the pandemic revealed that 48% of medical educators favoured in-person classes over online one (Zalat et al. 2021). Furthermore, this preference was found to be stronger when certain inherent characteristics of teaching-learning processes were found missing in the online mode. Among these key characteristics, lack of student engagement, inability to gauge non-verbal feedback, extended hours spent in class preparation and a perceived sense of disproportionality in the efforts invested, as opposed to student learning outcomes were emphasised. Similar observations have been made in a study that reports student experiences of online learning which document that is not as efficient in capturing spontaneous and vibrant discussions, nor does it allow non-verbal communication, thereby lacking in warmth, lacking a natural flow of communication (Berger et al. 2021). The same researchers also looked at educators' experiences in a social work department and reported that educators felt their students showed high levels of engagement, support, and empathy. Moreover, they could assimilate their experience of the pandemic and connect it with the content that was being taught. This was contrary to what our participants experienced. A possible reason for this difference could also be the age and maturity levels of students, our participants taught undergraduate students (age range 18–21 years) whereas the previous study had social work students studying at the post-graduate level. Moreover, professional development during social work graduate study inculcates pro-social behaviour and a sense of social responsibility which may have reflected an increase in empathy, support, and higher levels of engagement among them. A lot of the discontentment related to the online teaching experience among our participants was due to poor internet connectivity, bandwidth issues, and other technical challenges. India being a low-middle-income country has made rapid strides to meet the digital requirements of the new age. However, there still exists a wide disparity in the availability and quality of internet services in the country. About 40% of participants in a study conducted in Egypt by Zalat et al. (2021) cited unstable internet connectivity as the most frequently encountered barrier to teaching online. This common barrier could be attributed to the fact that both Egypt and India are developing countries and may have constraints related to digital connectivity.

Theme 3: questioning the validity of online assessments

There were several opposing views against the University Grants Commission's decision to conduct online examinations during the first wave of the pandemic in India. While some Universities complied with the new mandate because of concerns related to student's future academic, and job prospects, others thought that online examinations were unnecessary during the pandemic. Regardless of the stand taken by faculty members, concerns regarding the validity of these exams and matters of student integrity (use of unfair means during the examination process), were raised. Students were not trained for timed online exams. Moreover, discontentment regarding an over-reliance on application-based questions that relied on a combination of verbal ability and theoretical knowledge was also expressed. Butt (2016) in his study highlighted the use of unfair means like sticky notes, using alternative electronic devices, going offline, dimming the lights, and inappropriate positioning of webcams. Li et al. (2021) noted that online proctoring is costly, invasive, and leaves an opportunity for cheating. A study conducted at a medical school in Jordan noted how remote exams were stressful for at least one-third of the student population, stressors included exam duration, mode of question navigation, and technical problems (Elsalem et al. 2020). The aforementioned findings were consistent with our participants' observation of student anxiety associated with navigating testing portals.

Theme 4: contention regarding grading and evaluation policies

Participants from private universities faced challenges coming to terms with the grading and evaluation policies mandated by their institutions. Strict hierarchical work culture allowed no space for dissent. Our participants acknowledged that the pandemic demanded compassion towards students but also expressed a sense of being taken advantage of. Participants also felt caught between the management and the student body with respect to grading policies. Those favouring a compassionate approach rationalise that a pandemic must not be the reason that students fail (Krause 2020), others who favour a tougher approach emphasised the need to train students to cope better (Brooks 2020). Grading leniently or strictly are extremes and completely overlook the impact it has on student morale, learning outcomes, achievement motivation, and the sense of accomplishment which are all relative to each student's unique circumstances and access to learning conditions.

Theme 5: lack of a support network and peer engagement

Shifting to an online workspace was marked with a sense of isolation, and a lack of peer engagement, and support which was intrinsic to the pre-pandemic work environment. Social support was highlighted as a coping strategy against stress in a mixed methods study conducted in Ecuador during the pandemic (Hidalgo-Andrade, Hermosa-Bosano, and Paz 2021). The lack of such support therefore would have several repercussions on how educators cope with mounting challenges. Lack of informal interactions amongst peers led to a reported loss of productivity on account of procrastination. Despite the training and infrastructural support, there prevailed a feeling of helplessness associated with learning online pedagogical techniques. Similar to the suggestion by our participants, Ferren (2021) has also highlighted the need for peer mentorship programs to address their socio-emotional health.

Theme 6: enmeshment of boundaries between work and home

A work-life imbalance was unanimously reported across transcripts. A significant decline in the quality of life (Lizana et al. 2021) and burnout (Palumbo 2020) related to teaching during the pandemic has been noted. This was more pronounced for participants with young children,

especially young mothers. Observations by Lizana et al. (2021) similarly highlighted the impact on quality of life as being a gendered experience; predominantly affecting women. Long working hours, lack of time for physical activity, and a lack of downtime for recuperating from the stress of the day left educators overwhelmed. A need for clear-cut demarcation of working and non-working hours to manage stress levels has been advocated (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh 2020; Pieh et al. 2020; Pieh, Budimir, and Probst 2020)

Theme 7: are graduating students equipped enough to enter the workforce?

Several concerns were raised regarding the preparedness of graduating students to join the workforce. The absence of practical training, fieldwork, and on-site internship opportunities considered essential for certain disciplines was a major concern. Similar concerns have been raised by researchers who conducted an observational study of online education imparted to engineering students at California State University and reported the lack of hands-on training as one of the negative factors influencing online engineering education (Asgari, Trajkovic, Rehmani, Zhang, Lo & Sciortino, 2021). In contrast, some believe that online education, with all its short-comings, will still adequately prepare students for the workforce that now consists of geographically dispersed, virtual teams. Online learning during the pandemic has thus given them ample opportunity to develop skills such as the ability to effectively collaborate online, conduct research and analysis, use tools such as AI and cloud, master speaking and presentation skills, develop emotional intelligence, and become self-driven. A 2019 study conducted by IBM reported that soft skills have surpassed digital skills in the hierarchy of significance, thereby emphasising the need to acquire the aforementioned skill set for new job seekers (LaPrade et al. 2019).

Theme 8: could there be benefits to teaching online?

Certain pedagogical benefits were reported by participants who taught at institutions that lacked the technical infrastructure for ICT-incorporated teaching; they now had the opportunity to use PowerPoint, videos, etc., that aided the teaching process. While they did acknowledge an increase in preparation time, they also reported faster delivery of content. In addition, 'Organizational benefits' such as flexibility offered through remote teaching (Reinders and White 2010) and 'practical advantages' such as reduced time spent on travel (Todd 2020) were reported by our participants who had an existing experience of blended learning and found themselves better equipped to navigate the online mode.

Implications, recommendations, and future directions

This study has important implications for formulating policies and programs that promote the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competence required for online teaching. It has provided insight into the barriers associated with online teaching /learning processes which include access, acceptability, and affordability of internet services/ connectivity, technology, learning devices, and funds available to meet costs associated with them. This is significant given the variability in access and funds allocated to digital learning across educational institutes in India. Moreover, our study highlighted the disparity in the preparedness of faculty for online teaching between those associated with private universities as compared to government universities, with the former receiving greater opportunities for training and support as opposed to the latter. To ensure effective preparedness for online teaching, an analysis of the training needs must be conducted that is constructively aligned between faculty, students, and management. In addition, private universities as part of social responsibility could engage in a process of sharing knowledge and technical skills training with government institutions to promote equity in education across private and public sectors in India.

Furthermore, the findings had implications regarding the acceptability of certain screen-sharing platforms built with functions that allow for the smooth execution of routine teaching/ learning and administrative activities being deemed more acceptable than others among educators. Development of in-house applications for online teaching customised specifically for educator and learner needs within an educational context may help in meeting these challenges.

One of the issues that emerged from the findings was the identification of non-verbal feedback as an essential component of the overall teaching/learning experience which is not replicated in an online platform. Its absence in turn widens the psychological gap and brings in a sense of disconnectedness within the pedagogical process.

The study also alluded to a pragmatic approach towards conducting online examinations. Subtly implying a pass-all strategy on compassionate grounds but strongly enforcing a ceiling on the maximum marks obtained by students was associated with counterproductive outcomes. As an attempt to maintain a semblance of academic rigour, the strategy may be aspirational given the circumstances created during the pandemic but has practical challenges for the educators who implement these policies. An internal policy redressal cell for collating feedback from educators on strategies about online teaching, learning, and assessment practices needs to be established. Redesigning assessment tools that are acceptable, affordable, and accessible should be put in place to meet the academic integrity of online assessments.

Transitioning to online teaching is stressful and requires a steep learning curve for educators, especially those without prior experience of teaching online. The willingness to incorporate the use of technology in teaching within an atmosphere that fosters faculty growth and development is essential for facilitating the transition. One of the major implications of this study was the need for sensitisation towards educators' needs, building supportive networks, providing flexibility in work schedules, and respect for personal/off-duty time.

Hands-on training which is a vital component of discipline-specific education could be compensated via virtual simulation activities and experiential webinars for students.

Transitioning to online teaching during the pandemic has been an impetus for educators across the globe to gear themselves for the process as it has a broader reach and is more economical given the uncertainty of current times.

Disclosure statement

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