

The New Teaching Experience

The introduction of a blend of virtual and Face-to-face class room teaching in schools in some parts of the world is radically transforming the traditional teaching and learning experience. In an age of technology which allows for the use of the computer as a teaching and learning tool, powered by internet connectivity, there is little room to be overtly critical of the blended approach. Technology in several forms has long been introduced into schools and other educational institutions, but with the growing fears associated with contracting the Coronavirus, there has been a strong lobby for the incorporation of the blended approach to teaching and learning. The jury remains out on the overall benefits of the shift to this approach to any nation.

There is a commonly shared point of view, that those who advocate its use, see it as a way to safeguard the population from the spread of the Coronavirus. There is the alternate view that it is a measure which has been employed to achieve the goal of promoting new efficiencies in the workplace towards reducing expenditures, while at the same time broadening the use of technologies.

On the surface, the move to a blended approach of virtual and Face-to-face teaching, appears not to be an immediate problem for those teachers whose contractual arrangement safeguard their security of tenure and remuneration. There is likely to be a problem where the new blended teaching and learning approach, requires some changes or modifications to be made to existing conditions of service. This is where the vigilance of trade unions becomes important, as forced changes could have implications on the way teachers' function, with respect to the responsibilities they must now assume. Some may argue that life for the teacher is made easier since they can work from the comfort of their homes. They do not have to commute to school on a regular basis, buy lunches, assist students in the purchase of materials, and are released of the pressure of class room management and the stress in handling class sizes of thirty students, who have behavioral problems, and present varying dispositions and attitudes.

The new arrangements which apply to the virtual and Face-to-face teaching experience, places a new set of demands and responsibilities on teachers. They also bring a set of new challenges. Upfront, it requires that teachers incur expenditure in making the purchase of a computer, laptop or tablet. Some may find that intense use of the computer or laptop, may create a set of medical challenges. To begin with, the daily use of the hands on the keyboard can lead to individuals developing carpal tunnel syndrome. For the avoidance of repetitive strains injuries, back pains and other health related issues, it is therefore important to have a proper computer desk and chair. The purchase of furniture and equipment will now become the responsibility of teachers. There is also the added responsibility of providing a

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safe and comfortable work environment. There is an expected shift from the employer to teachers in meeting operating expenses, such as furniture, equipment, service fees for Wi-Fi connectivity and possibly higher electricity bills.

Without even noticing it, teachers are now required to work twice as hard, as they have to separately prepare for online classes and face-to-face classes. This represents an increase in the work load. Those teachers who are not technology savvy will face the frustration of uploading materials, preparing graphics as part of their teaching aides and doing such maneuvers as putting up information on a split screen. This frustration could lead to a new form of stress, anxiety and burnout.

Teachers have the consolation of knowing that the virtual classroom cannot replace the traditional classroom. In the virtual classroom they will have to become accustomed to the fact that the personal contact and interaction with students will no longer be the same. What can be more disconcerting for teachers is the loss of control they can normally exercise over their students in the Face-to-face classroom. Discipline and order which are so important to a conducive learning environment will be harder to maintain in an environment where students have a measure of control as to how and when they participate. The use of the mute button on the computer and the ability which rest with them to switch on and off their camera, removes the power of control from teachers and places it firmly in the hands of students. Chances are students can log on as being present, but are not actively part of the class.

The face-to-face teaching experience allows teachers to effectively manage the classroom. Teachers will have to cope with the limitations of the technology which restricts them from being able to see the body language and facial expressions of students at one glance. Teachers who are comfortable with the use of the technology are likely to be inclined to give support to the move to online classes. Having identified some of the demands, additional responsibilities and shortcomings the virtual class room throws up, hopefully teachers, administrators and policy makers will take cognizance of the fact that the delivery of education at the level of school, is not primarily about the covering of a syllabus. Since school is the training ground for the socialization of our students in preparing them as citizens and workers, then the face-to-face teaching is critical for the purpose of instilling discipline, manners, morals, values and providing for interaction with other students and teachers.