



Rethink teaching, learning beyond COVID-19

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C COVID-19 offers an opportunity for innovation in education despite the stress it wrecked on students worldwide. UNICEF estimates that pandemic disrupted the classes of more than 1.57 billion students, accounting to 91 per cent of students worldwide. As families get affected physically, financially, and emotionally by the situation, more than ever, pupils, especially young children, need the sense of stability, purpose and social connections that they get from their schools.

At this juncture, it is therefore crucial that all stakeholders — parents, teachers and educators band together as a community; we have to adapt, innovate and bounce back, in order to be there for our students in their time of need. This month, UNICEF has launched their global agenda for action, imploring for increased investments in the welfare of children, with one of the six pillars of the agenda being “keep children learning”.

As a proponent of the ‘Right to Education’, one of the fundamental Human Rights, UNICEF has been partnering with governments across the world to ensure continued learning at home, through government media & interventions such as television, radio & Internet.

Adapting to a change is difficult even under normal circumstances; under extraordinary measures, it becomes even more so. But in the context of COVID-19, the very first step is to accept that some of these changes are long-lasting, perhaps even permanent. Medical experts all around the world are warning us that social distancing might be around for a while longer. Life may never again be the same. By the time we get out of these crises, the world would have permanently changed its perceptions and the habits we hold on to. For example, in the case of education, including K12 schooling, lessons would no longer be just within classrooms. E-learning, at least as a blended curriculum along with in-person education, would be the norm rather than only an emergency measure.

So, as key drivers of our children’s education, how do we innovate, make the

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best use of this time, and ensure continued learning for students?

First, start with yourself. Upskill yourself. This is applicable for all but is especially true for educators, who need to be one, if not several steps ahead of their students. We cannot teach 21st Century skills, if we ourselves are stuck in 19th Century schooling. You may join any of the thousands of courses available online that teach everything from “how to learn online” to “how to build a rocket”, often for free.

Next is to establish a daily routine. Teachers and educators can share calendars and plans for both online & offline learning so that children may find the comfort of certainty and structure.

Parents too can chart out a few activities and chores for their children. The necessity for social distancing has meant an increased adoption of digital. Explore the various websites and apps that enable virtual calls, conferences and meet-ups, and e-lessons.

Equally vital is to plan ahead for a disruptive year. Expect further challenges for at least six more months. Anticipating these, schools, universities, and educators must explore and prepare new ways of engaging with students that ensure continued learning and sustained student-teacher connections. Make the lessons more experiential with virtual labs, 3D tours, activity sheets, interactive sites, projects, remote internships that can make a class more practical & fun.

Nevertheless, we have to understand that a digital-only approach may not be feasible for all; the solutions will have to also take into account the many barriers in the adoption of digital — age of the user, access to technologies, financial backgrounds, screen time and so on. Therefore, the ideal approach would be multi-pronged, utilising a variety of media — digital, mass media and print. Additionally, it needs to be customised to understand the requirements of a specific student, class, or school and involve all concerned stakeholders. But the important point is to just get started, and improvise on the go instead of waiting for perfection.

COVID-19 also offers a unique opportunity to hand the rein of learning back to the learner and show that the best learning is self-enabled, rather than teacher-led learning.

Even as WHO recommends social distancing, they have been highlighting the need for meaningful social connections. Many students may find it hard to be unexpectedly cooped up inside without their friends, teachers, the support system in schools & universities, and the stability they had so far. They seek someone to empathise and engage with them. Teachers and counsellors, if they can, must reach out to their students— over the phone, email, chat — to talk about their fears & concerns. Parents too have to be conscious of the emotional impact of the school closures and lockdowns & intervene accordingly.

Across Oman, most schools and universities, including Indian schools, have started to offer lessons online. In the initial stages, there might be a few glitches in the reach and scope of the solutions being adopted, as e-teaching is relatively new to the educators themselves. But over time, we can hope to reach a midway where all concerned — students, teachers, educational institutes and the community at large come together to facilitate learning.

As the world slows down, may we also make the moments count and make the best use of the blessing of time we have received, to prepare today for a newer future.