

# Will Blended Learning Cater to Rural-Urban Distress?



By  
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**T**he pandemic has not only impacted economic activities and exposed our healthcare unpreparedness but also posed serious challenges to our educational system. During the pandemic, digital learning, online classes were seen as an important technological advancement. But the very process has further created sharp rural and urban divide.

The virtual class was considered a way forward during the pandemic but it cannot be complete solution because India which is a land of villages is not completely equipped with the kind of infrastructure and apparatus required for virtual learning. The blended learning concept proposed by UGC has its advantage and disadvantage

as well. The very concept may sound good for urban areas but may not be a viable concept for the rural areas. Before its implementation a lot of groundwork is required to be done in rural areas in order to make it more pragmatic to address the concern of rural areas. The big question: Will Blended learning mode cater to the rural-urban distress?

Some experts have welcomed it if it serves the purpose but many have raised doubts on its implementation and its feasibility. The traditional method of learning will always remain important and it should remain in practice, keeping in mind the purpose it has served so far. The virtual learning can be a method but not complete method of learning, keeping in mind the rural and urban educational infrastructure. It remains to be seen how viable blended learning could be as we move from here onwards.

As per the introductory part of concept note on Blended Learning by UGC, "It is an instructional methodology, a teaching and learning approach that combines face-to-face classroom methods

with computer mediated activities to deliver instruction. This pedagogical approach means a mixture of face-to-face and online activities and the integration of synchronous and asynchronous learning tools, thus providing an optimal possibility for the arrangement of effective learning processes. Blended learning is the term given to the educational practice of combining digital learning tools with more traditional classroom face to face teaching."

"In a true blended learning environment, both the student and the teacher should be physically located in the same space. Despite this, the digital tools used should be able to be utilised by the students in order to enforce some control over the speed or topics of their learning. The flipped classroom model is a similar programme that aims to utilise technology in order to rearrange the learning experience and maximise the effectiveness of valuable face to face time in the classroom. In a flipped classroom programme, students would be encouraged to access digital learning materials via a cloud-based

learning platform during their own time,” the concept note highlighted.

According to Amir Ali, Assistant Professor, Centre for Political Studies, JNU, “The blended learning mode in my understanding seeks to place learning at the frontiers, boundaries and intersections of different disciplines. It seeks to break down disciplinary boundaries not by completely eliminating them, but by making them less forbidding and in doing so making it easy to make frequent journeys across them. There have been various attempts at these especially in centres of learning such as Jawaharlal Nehru University where multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary was encouraged in the way the Centres of study were organised.”

Ali added, “Thus JNU had a Centre for Political Studies, rather than the more traditional Department of Political Science to be found in most other Indian universities. In much the same way there was the Centre for Historical Studies instead of the more traditional Department of History. The JNU manner of multidisciplinary would be an instance of such blended learning. More recently a private university in the South, Krea University aims to promote what it calls 'interwoven learning', which it claims is a pioneering approach.”

“More importantly, blended learning can correct the lopsidedness in terms of

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the overemphasis in the last few decades on the Science, Technology, Engineering and Management (STEM) disciplines. If the current Corona virus pandemic has taught us anything, it is the need to draw from the insight of the humanities, the social sciences and literary works that provide a unique insight into what is called the human predicament. An overemphasis on the strictly speaking market friendly disciplines such as the STEM disciplines means that many crises situations that humanity is likely to face in the future, will not have enough people skilled in wider cognitive thinking and cognitive imagination that is offered by a blended approach in which there is a healthy and balanced combinations that draws from distinct fields of learning,” he said.

Syed Tanveer Ahmed, Director, Education and Media Department JIH, while sharing his perspective said, “Yes, it should be introduced in India. In fact, it is in practice in various institutions particularly institutions catering to the affluent class who affords the computer, smartphone and those who have very good internet connection. But this has problem in the rural and remote areas. My argument is that the government is spending a lot of money on unproductive projects and spending millions of rupees on statues, buildings and some kinds of propaganda work. Instead of that the government should increase the education budget at least by two per cent to the existing budget. So if they could increase the budget, they can develop the infrastructure with the increased budget and also schools in the rural areas.

Ahmed added, “Now blended education with smartphone and internet is essential because a smart teacher or a teacher with very good understanding or approach of pedagogy can't go from one place to another or to remote areas. For example: There is an X teacher who is an expert in Mathematics but he stays somewhere in Lucknow so he cannot travel to remote village. In that case, this teacher who is expert in Mathematics can get connected with the students through internet. So we can avail the services of or students can get benefited by this

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particular teacher. After getting connected with this teacher for some time, later on they can interact with the teacher who is over there in the village. So that teacher who is there in the classroom can enhance the quality depending upon the explanation given by this expert teacher. This way students of remote areas can get the benefit from expert teacher.”

On the very concept, he said, “Blended learning is very much age old concept. We had no computers and internet but we had other approaches of learning like games, sport activities, circle time activity, site seeing or trips. So blending this with the classrooms is essential. Learning is not all about chalk and talk. It is more than that and we should have experiences, engagements. Now the concept of homework has gone and the concept of engagement has evolved. This concept of engagement is nothing but blending education with practical experiences, practical work, and project work, visiting the malls, fire stations, post

offices and railway stations. All these will increase the knowledge and skills. So there should not be any excuse to the blended learning.”

“The government should come forward. Yes, there is lack of facilities but we cannot just say that because of lack of facilities we should not introduce blended learning. The Government should invest more and more in infrastructure to provide the students with facilities like smartphones and internet facilities. Sometimes blended learning requires supervision of parents and in my view ecosystem should be developed for blended learning,” he said.

“Blending the offline classroom learning with online facilities is a good idea and would enable the pupils to get benefitted from experts. Before popularising such blend, there should be an exhaustive policy to reduce the existing alarming scale of digital divide, at least in education sector. Such a policy demands substantial increase

in Educational spending. We have been demanding 6% GDP spending on education. We must say 2 to 3 per cent of GDP more on education. If blending is popularised without addressing the digital divide, it would further accelerate the huge inequality persistent in Education now,” Ahmed argued.

Professor Apoorvanand, who teaches Hindi, Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi, in his article, “Why UGC’s proposal for ‘blended teaching’ is a bad idea,” published by *The Indian Express* has reasonably argued, “The new move should not come as a surprise as this government has, right from the beginning, seen physical campuses as a “nuisance”. It has unleashed its student wing to discipline students and teachers, used punitive measures and nearly finished them off as deliberative spaces. This is yet another move to tighten control over classrooms.”

“The fear of teachers that this is a ruse to cut costs in higher education is also real. The last seven years have seen a gradual reduction in the budget allocations for higher education. The new proposal is a way of cutting the number of teachers in the name of liberating students. This proposal also refuses to acknowledge the huge digital divide that exists in India. It would certainly punish poor students and those from the SC, ST communities the most,” he argued. ■ R