Emergence of Blended Academia during COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on soft skill development in students: A Study among the Secondary School Teachers in Nashik city

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Abstract:

With rapid technological advancements and globalization that continue to transform urban space and the world of work, education systems have gradually detached themselves from the demands and the realities of the emerging global societies and economies. In this context, the primary and secondary school systems have a fundamental and crucial role to play in preparing the global citizens and the workforce of the future. It's a clarion call for the education systems to equip the future citizens with the skills to create a more cohesive, inclusive and beneficial world. No doubt COVID-19 outbreak has unleashed the biggest calamity that humanity has faced so far, and have ensured pandemonium like never witnessed earlier, grinding the whole world to a halt with mandatory shutdowns and social distancing, shifting the landscape of the pandemic to become pandemic. This scare is unanimously egging on educators and learners at all levels to adapt to online learning techniques which have been thrust into the limelight as the education ecosystem marches ahead to pull their heads out of the sand to embrace new learning technologies they have been dreading. With a blink of an eye, the schools are drifted to an era of online learning which has forced the education system to revamp and shift from classrooms to distance learning mode, and the parents seem to assume the roles of teachers and are fast becoming savvy with resources created for home schoolers to cause minimal disruptions. In many respects, the blended education giant is accelerating changes through the video conferencing platforms such as WebEx, Zoom and learning Management systems like Google

classroom, G-Suite, Blackboard, Moodle, Pearson, Success Net, talent LMS which are gaining momentum.

Keywords: blended learning, pandemic, soft skill development

Introduction

Amid of this COVID-19 crisis, it is sure that educators are wondering what they need to prepare the children of the millennial for in the future. According to the World Economic Forum Report, 2020, 65% of the school children will work in new job types that do not yet exist, most of which are likely to have an increased premium on both digital and socio-emotional skills. In an interconnected world, the future workers will be expected to collaborate with peers residing in various part of the globe, understand cultural nuances and, in many cases, use digital tools to enable these new types of interactions

(https://www.weforum.org/, 2020)

Blended learning and e-learning as networks of sharing knowledge has changed dramatically the traditional concept of learning.(Parsazedeh, 2013),and IT plays an important role in modern education to gain competitive gain (oudonexa ymoungkhorun, 2012). The rapidly changing education scenario should be a marker to show that teaching methods need to evolve to keep up with the times and incorporate integrated technologies(Giaria, 2020)

As technology continues to automate routine task, human-centric skills will provide a distinct advantage over machines in the workplace. Employers report leadership, social influence and emotional intelligence to be among the high demands interpersonal skills of the future(https://www.weforum.org/, 2020). The significant growth of technology in education has replaced the traditional learning such as using the blackboard and chalk in explaining the subject by technology-based learning such as doing homework on the laptop, internet, or tablet (Evans, 2011)Living in the current digital age enables everyone to easily access the learning materials anytime and everywhere using technology tools (Fu, 2013)Education through the new communication technologies can enable global citizenship education, enhancing the skills in the students with the help of online technologies is not only an absolute necessity but also a definite possibility(Senthil Nathan, 2016)The transition in education through blended learning is creating learning ecosystems that are personalized and self-paced; accessible and inclusive; problem-based and collaborative; lifelong and student-driven.(Schwab, School of the future defining new models of Education, 2020). This transformation is shifting learning content to include both the technical and human-centric skills needed to build a growing and inclusive

economies and societies that shifts learning experiences that more closely mirror the future of work.

Need and Impact of blended learning in developing life skills

Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, proposes that we have entered a 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' although it's full ramification yet to be handled. He focuses on the 'boundless prospects' of billions of individuals connected by mobile devices offering 'a confluence of emerging technology breakthroughs. Many of these innovations are in their early stage, but they are already reaching an intonation point in their development as they expand on and enhance each other in a fusion of innovations across the physical, digital and biological universe.(Schwab 2016:1).The transition to Education 4.0 will also require learning mechanisms that more closely mirror the future of work, and that takes full advantage of the opportunities offered by new learning technologies. The shifts in learning content and experiences are not mutually exclusive. Creating a learning environment that is personalized and self-paced; accessible and inclusive; problem-based and collaborative; and lifelong- and student-driven can help unlock, for example, the interpersonal and innovation skills needed for the future, much in the same way that global citizenship can help create progressively comprehensive learning. As innovation continues to mechanize routine tasks, human-driven skills will provide a favourable advantage over machines in the workplace. Employers report leadership, social influence and emotional intelligence to be among the high-demand interpersonal skills of the future. There is a dire need to refresh the education framework to equip children with the skills to navigate the future of work and the future of societies.(Fleming, 2020)

While India is making headway in digitising the learning process, the world over, universities are disrupting and innovating teaching and learning. The country has a long tradition of face-to-face learning; the teacher or *guru* cannot be replaced with an unseen, technological entity overnight. However, it is pertinent to note that the gap between what students are taught in classrooms and what the industry is demanding of its prospective employees is growing every day.The solution lies in 'blended learning', a concept that is fast gaining pace in the Indian context. It is a hybrid form of teaching and learning which involves both classroom and online learning. The approach mixes concept building and enquiry-based learning which retains human interaction in education and allows students to combine traditional classroom methods with online-digital mediums. Blended learning strives to create a balance between prescriptive

learning and learning at one's own pace. The core of blended learning is giving the student greater autonomy over his or her education growth path, using technology only as an enabler. The blended classroom of the future can leverage the power of online courses and free up classroom time for interactive collaboration and discussion, testing and problem-solving, redefining how education is administered, while at the same retaining the ethos of India's traditional classroom system.(https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/economy/why-blended-learning-is-future-of-indian-education-2392481.html, 2020)

The success factors of blended learning include:

More engaged students, better information and feedback on work, team teaching, and extended time with students, more leadership roles, focus on deeper learning, and motivate students, new options to teach at home, individualized professional development plans. Blended learning tears down the traditional bricks and mortar approach to teaching, which can improve conditions like, reduced Isolation, more opportunities for collaboration, meaningful development and improved Time efficiency. Blended learning offers a multitude of real-life skills like; Research skills, Self-learning, Self-engagement, Helps to develop a 'self-driving force', Better decision making, offers a larger sense of responsibility and Computer literacy.(https://www.teachthought.com/technology/the-benefits-of-blended-learning/, 2020)

Objectives of the study

1. To know the extent of the awareness of blended learning among the teachers in the schools of Nashik city.
2. To analyse the impact of blended learning on future life skills
3. To study the challenges in skill development through blended learning

Scope of the study

The use of technology in Education is increasing day by day, offering better learning opportunities and access to information. While looking at the broader prospects of the study are carried out in the schools in Nashik city. The education faculties can make use of "blended learning" virtual and physical recourses as an alternative approach in teaching and learning during the unprecedented times like the pandemic to enhance life skills in the future generations. This study indirectly suggests the requirement of rebooting instructor's role as a need for updating of skills among students which will enhance connectedness, communication and collaboration among students and faculty. A study such as this one would form a baseline to help students, parents and faculties to incorporate the new technology to develop the life

skills like creativity and critical thinking, adaptability or flexibility, communication and collaboration, resilience, empathy and emotional intelligence within the blended learning environment. This study will assist the stakeholders, parents, educators and curriculum experts to plan their modules while incorporating blended learning in Indian Education setting.

Limitation of the study

This study is limited to school teachers within the demographic area of Nashik city. The data could be collected through the semi-structured Google questionnaire telephonic interview due to the social distancing norms and national lockdown during the pandemic.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive research of the survey type. The study involves the use of a structured questionnaire to collect data from the randomly selected respondents in the sampled 10 institutions, while convenience random sampling technique was used to select the respondents.

The questionnaire comprises of 4 sections:

The first section comprises of six questions on demographic information, the sub-sections were Gender, qualification, years of experience, subjects taught, familiarity with blended learning, sources of awareness of blended learning.

The second section comprises of six awareness of blended learning, in which six questions were formulated taking into consideration both positive and negative aspects of blended learning.

The third section consists of ten questions on the development of life skills through blended learning, and the last section consists of six questions on the challenges in developing life skills through blended learning.

The questions were measured using 5-point Likert scales from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Initially, the questions were given to experts in educational technology for content and face validity. A pilot test was conducted on ten teachers through online method to determine the reliability of the questions.

The Google questionnaire is circulated online to 100 teachers across 10 high schools in Nashik city. 77 numbers of respondents were randomly selected from the returned questionnaire via email.
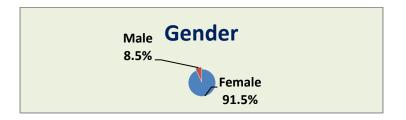
Tools used

Google questionnaire was constructed and standardized. This online questionnaire consists of thirty items, subdivided into four sections about the objectives of the research.

Data analysis and Interpretations

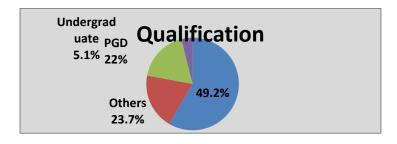The data collected online was subjected to statistical analysis to arrive at a conclusion

SECTION I: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Gender:

Among the 280 respondents in the ten school of Nashik city, 91.5% were female teachers and 8.5% were male teachers
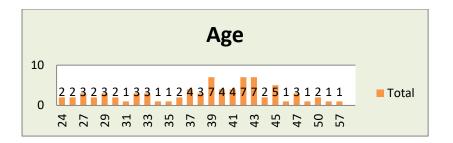
Qualification

49.2% of the respondents had completed their Masters degree, 22% were with PGD, 5.1% were Undergraduate and 23.7% had completed other courses.

Age: About 40 respondents were below 30years, 160 respondents were between 30-40 years, 85 teachers were 40-50 years old and 10 teachers were above 50 years but below 60 years of age.
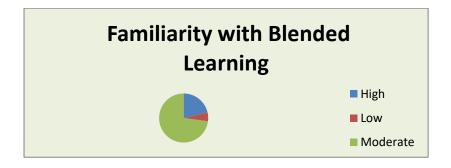
Age:

Years of experience: About 80 teachers are having less than 10 years of experience, around 140 respondents have 10-20 years of experience and around 60teachers have more than 20 years of experience.
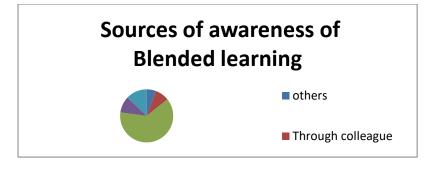
Year of Experience (in Years)

Count of Familiarity with Blended Learning

73.3% of the respondents were moderately familiar with blended learning, 20% were highly familiar and only 6.7% were having low familiarity with blended learning.

Sources of awareness of Blended Learning:

63.3% among the respondents were aware of blended learning through internet /online means, 11.7% were aware through seminars/ conference, 10% each were aware through colleagues and lecture respectively and only 5% were aware through other means.

SECTION II: AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION OF BLENDED LEARNING

S/N		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree.
1	Blended Learning improves the quality of teaching	3%	6%	13%	60%	18%
2	Blended learning provides learning anywhere anytime	3%	6%	7%	59%	25%
3	Blended Learning enhances monitoring and grading of students	-	18%	16%	56%	10%
4	Lack of internet connectivity will affect Blended Learning platform.	3%	9%	8%	54%	26%
5	Blended Learning is more time consuming than traditional methods	-	26%	31%	33%	10%
6	Blended Learning makes teachers to lose control over teaching and learning process	11%	53%	24%	12%	-

An innovative learning environment like Blended learning is found useful in terms of opportunities to improve teaching and learning through life skills. Awareness and perception are relative terms; it reveals that the High school teachers in Nashik city are quite aware of the use of Blended learning in terms of availability, quality, usage, students' enhancement, control over teaching and learning process and internet connectivity. It is in this view that the awareness and perception of blended learning was explored. Frequencies of the responses were converted to percentage and were calculated for the analysis of data.

The findings revealed that 60% agreed that blended learning improves the quality of learning. 59%propounded that it provides learning anywhere anytime, and 56% opined that blended teaching enhances monitoring and grading of the students. However 31% were neutral that blended learning is more time consuming and 33% agreed that it is more time consuming than the traditional method. 53% of respondents disagree that blended learning makes teachers lose control over teaching and learning process. 54% of teachers agree that lack of connectivity will affect blended learning platform.

In line with this it is clear that blended learning is way ahead of traditional teaching learning method and has the capability of influencing the learning and caters to development of life skills. Moreover, the study indicates that the respondents are aware of blended learning and their perception about blended learning is positive. Given this, there are some implications of direction for further research that stems from the study.

SECTION III: DEVELOPMENT OF LIFE SKILLS THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

S/N		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree.
1	Blender learning provides adaptability or flexibility	-	-	14%	66%	20%
2	Blender learning leads to interdependence and collaboration	-	-	27%	62%	11%
3	Blended learning enhances good communication skills	-	14%	14%	58%	14%

4	Blender learning enhances creativity	-	6%	17%	56%	21%
5	Blender learning promotes critical thinking	-	10%	23%	53%	14%
6	Blender learning promotes ethics	-	24%	29%	43%	4%
7	Blender learning leads to resilience		9%	40%	42%	7%
8	Blender learning enhances emotional intelligence	-	26%	31%	37%	6%
9	Blender learning makes way for empathy	-	17%	44%	35%	4%
10	Blender learning promotes discipline	4%	26%	30%	33%	7%

The results revealed that blended learning has a positive impact on the development of life skills to which 60% of the respondents agreed that blended learning provides adaptability or flexibility. Another life skill interdependence and collaboration stand out as 62% agreed for the same. About 58% opined that blended learning enhances good communication skills. The skill like creativity which pronounces innovation can be enhanced through blended learning in accordance to the opinion of 56% of the respondents. Critical thinking too can be commendably developed through blended learning as 53% of respondents opined to it. About 43% propounded that blended learning leads to resilience and also promotes ethics. 42.4% agreed that blended learning promotes emotional intelligence, 36.7% approve that it enhances discipline. The respondents were more neutral towards empathy being enhanced through blended learning as there is neither personal touch nor face to face interaction. There is a thin line of difference in the opinion shared about the role of blended learning in promoting discipline

This study suggests that blended learning goes beyond the teaching and learning process to development and promotion of life skills which provide opportunities for the future generation to make a mark for their career and life.

SECTION IV: CHALLENGES IN LIFESKILL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

S/N		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree.
1	Blended Learning enhances chats or texting among learners	-	3%	8%	80%	9%
2	Blended learning helps in time management	3%	9%	27%	54%	7%
3	Blended Learning is more engaging than the traditional method		17%	19%	53%	11%
4	More screen time through Blended learning will cause health issues in young generation	-	4%	11%	52%	33%
5	Blended Learning enhances learner's talents and hobbies	4%	11%	26%	50%	9%
6	Blended learning decreases physical activities	-	5%	13%	46%	36%
7	Social interaction and emotional connect are balanced in Blended Learning	4%	21%	31%	41%	3%
8	Blended learning lowers the assessment or grades of the learner	-	41%	34%	25%	-

Blended learning represents a switch from traditional leaning to active learning which compels the learner to engage in reading, speaking, listening and thinking, as 53% of respondents

revealed that blended learning engages the students more than the traditional methods and 80% of the respondents agreed that it enhances chats and texting among learners hence creates a high level of interaction, personalization and relevance Blended learning lets the instructor tailor learning content to unique needs of the different audience as 54% opines that it helps in time management. Blended learning is an effective and low risk strategy aimed at meeting the transformational challenges that technological development brings about in education(Kaur, 2012)as 50% approve that it enhances talents and hobbies. 41% teachers agree that blended learning adds a human touch as social interactions and emotional connect are balanced in blended learning.

Among the respondents 41% disagree that blended learning lowers the assessment or grades of the learners. However, 52% respondents concur that it may cause health issues in the young generation over prolonged usage of digital media. About 46% agree and 36% strongly agree that blended learning may deteriorate and decrease physical activities in the students.

Blended learning provides flexibility in learning for both students and teachers. Integration of the virtual and physical landscapes enables both instructors and students to become learners, but this is most effective when there is institutional support through the provision of professional learning and the opportunity for redesigning courses for the most appropriate blend(Kaur, 2012)

Conclusion

In traditional learning we first comprehend the academic content and then appear for the test, but in real life we first encounter the real test and learn a lesson. We learn by doing which involves utilization of life skills (Jain, 2011). Life skills are applications of knowledge values and skills leading to optimal development of the individual, which include skills like communication, interdependence, time management, critical thinking and problem-solving ability. Life skills enable an individual to deal effectively with the demand and challenges of life in a healthy and productive manner.

In the current health scare scenario, the technology has taken the centre stage in school curriculum through blended learning which forms the link between the traditional and conventional teaching learning experience. Even though traditional learning enables easy understanding due to face to face interaction, online blended learning gives the learner more flexibility in terms to time, space and skill development.

The learner environment will continue to latch on the bandwagon through blended learning even after the pandemic has died down, because there are signs proposing that teaching and developing life skills through digital industry will scale up in a massive way to meet the competencies that the future job demands

Further recommendations

This study raises some opportunities for further research both within and outside the educational context. This study could extend to higher levels of education like Degree College, teacher training institution, medical and engineering Institutions. The study could be extended to explore other skills at different levels of higher educational institutions. The study could be utilized to explore the difference of different life skills at different levels of higher educational institutions. This study could be suggested to investigate the influence of demographic variables like gender, age qualification and years of working experience with respect to different skills of the future.

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