

A Long Hyphen: Covid Crisis, Digital Learning, and Creativity

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Abstract

The outbreak of covid has taken the world by awe, no doubt, but, at the same time, it has severely impacted the usual ways of teaching-learning. It may be said that covid, despite being a gargantuan crisis, is an important cognitive-affective phase in human development in general and for the student-community in particular. Learning, according to the recent pedagogical findings, is of two broad categories – (a) the visually oriented learning and (b) the haptically determined one. In the face of a common predicament like covid, the hierarchy between these two types has just fizzled away, yielding place to a digital deterritorialization and reterritorialization of experience. The discrimination, of course, doesn't vaporize overnight but, at least, it is loudly acknowledged. This paper examines how the sudden yet an indispensable advent of multiple digital interfaces, indeed, conjures an atmosphere for the use and celebration of interdisciplinarity and how the coalescing of disciplines naturally translates into fabulous creative outputs, especially in the realm of teaching-learning.

Keywords: covid crisis, teaching-learning, digital terrains, interdisciplinarity

Introduction

Can despondency be both “beautiful and horrifying”? Yes, that's what the keenly sensitive Wilfred Owen writes during the winter of 1911-12 in ‘Supposed Confessions of a Second rate Sensitive Mind in Dejection’:

*... face to face, she fixed on me her stare:
Woe, woe, my blood has never moved since then;
Down-dragged like corpse in sucking, slimy fen,
I sank to feel the breath of that Despair. (Wilfred Owen 83)*

The first quarter of the previous century brought upon humankind the slough of warfare, whereas the present a colossal despondency in the wake of covid, that fetched up, demon-like, and “down-dragged like corpse in sucking, slimy fen”. The whole world came to a standstill. The fresh flurry of life was gone. The air breathed virus. In the garden of Oscar Wilde's fable, loomed the Giant alone, as the “trespasser” prohibitive flashed. Anxiety mingled with the throbs of life. A full-stop festered and all smiles stopped.

What could the shut walls provide the harried mass? A harried despondency. The exponentially mutating virus was wreaking havoc. Every break of day was an occasion for death. For, humanity, however, the turmoil was not just physical. The catastrophic chain of events soon muddled the psyche, culminating in a torpor that humankind has ever faced in the long march of creativity. “Darkling” notwithstanding, newer adaptive, combative and counterproductive means were on the air. They had to be! Every deluge finds it. A belief, of course, lay somewhere that the clouds would pass. And, as the Doomsday began to feeble, as coveted, the

belief gathered momentum. The stony, daunting grimace of the full-stop thawed, as it were. A long hyphen resurrected to favour the world.

Learner and Learning: The Usual Ways

Metaphorically speaking, a hyphen is a harbinger of hope, unlike the stasis that a full-stop is. Something obvious follows a hyphen and, not just this, a hyphenated word means the birth of a whole new dimension of meaning. In this paper I propose to see the cataclysmic covid-phase as not just murderously degenerative but as a period of valued gestation. By all means, covid is a crisis and crisis means passing from one phase to another under great duress. Given the magnitude of loss, this is true both physically and emotionally. Since the covid-crisis is inextricably bound up with bodily, as well as with emotional changes, the arguments of my paper revolve round a critical domain in which body, emotions, and mind have to adjust to an interim terra-incognita. We can summarily say that it is an important cognitive-affective phase in human development in general and that of the student-community in particular. If we pay close attention to the different behavioural reactions and attitudes of learners during and after covid, if not the period before it, we find this intervening hyphen to be a decisive juncture in a learner's life. The adaptive, counterproductive changes unfurl only if a crisis knocks and much of this change is due to the degree of difficulty through which the learner manoeuvres his or her way. The responses to the crisis vary, indeed. To some learners, the difficulties seem unsurmountable. They mostly remain frigid to this absolutely unsolicited turn of events. But, to a considerable number, the more unwelcoming is the situation, the greater is the urge to respond to it properly. The sudden and the very necessary switch to the digital media as an indispensable tool for learning is, after all, a corollary of profound psychological changes. Especially for the learning community, the changes must have, first, come in their imaginative terrains. To determine the exact nature of this suddenly surfacing creativity – evolving and metamorphosing at the same time – we need look into the facts that trigger the psychological change in a learner's imaginative concept.

In pedagogical parlance, it is almost axiomatic that a learner's praxis of imagination is principally bound up with the self, with subjective feelings, and subjective interfaces with surroundings. Usually for a growing learner, the subjective relationships with surroundings keep varying and they keep varying only in degrees, not in kinds. It is observed that, with time, a learner's allegiance to the world of symbols considerably wanes; the awareness of the self intensifies, which, in turn, translates into a more poignant and punctilious expression of the body. This is a standard and a unanimously accepted critical attitude of any learner in any place of the world towards his or her creative-didactic accountability. In fact, all learning communities, so far as the science of learning is concerned, pass through this creative-didactic journey and the corresponding critical awareness that makes this journey possible is mainly of two categories. There are learners who cultivate the *self* for all experiences or vice-versa and the other groups are devoted more to the surroundings than anything else, for creative-didactic outputs. Thus, according to extant pedagogical research, two different but distinct orientations exist among the learners – (a) those mainly concerned with the visual experiences are the visually-minded learners and (b) those with kinesthetic ones are the haptici-minded learners.

Eyes are the sine-qua-non for the visually-minded learning community. A common man may think that the ocular health and the visual exactitude are mutually complementary. However, superior visual awareness has got nothing to do with the normalcy of the eyes. On the contrary, as experiments have shown, the appropriate psychological inclination for observing is of paramount importance. How does learning occur for a visually-minded learner? If we examine this question in keener details, we will find that not being able to see is not always a pejorative or prohibitive factor. The visually-minded learner first takes interest in the general, broad outlines of a phenomenon. For instance, in a botany class, if the teacher is demonstrating a leaf, the learners first imbibe in the general shape of the leaf, then the tip, the margin, the midrib, the petiole, and finally

everything incorporated in the conceptualization of the whole leaf. It all starts with a general morphological premise and, with time, tiny but consequential impressions are synthesized into a whole, comprehensive image. This is true not only academically, but also aesthetically.

In fact, since visual accomplishment is conducive to the analysis of every little component of an object, it lets the learner delve deep into the nature of the object. However, observing merely the details associated with a phenomenon is not always an appreciable quality. Acquainting oneself with the formal shapes and structures of an object is undoubtedly a learner's visual-minded competence. It also speaks volumes of the learner's sound memory and his subjective interest in these nuanced details. However, the right visual calibre lies in locating the changing effects of these characteristics in proportion to the changing external conditions. Convincing examples can be cited from the chapter of light. With the changes in external conditions, the optical behaviours also tend to change. Nonetheless, how does a visually-minded learner approximate the possible learning outcomes, even if oftentimes he or she misses the phenomenal change quite tangibly? It is, in many a way, hypothetical. To meet the learning objective, visually-minded learners invariably transform tactile and kinesthetic experiences into visual experiences. This, then, leads us to believe that various other experiences are constantly contributing to a decisive visual worldview of a learner.

Now, the other category of learners may be said to belong to the haptically minded learners. For a haptically minded learner, the bodily, emotional and intellectual apprehension of any object or phenomenon is incurably subjective. Such a learner puts the self before everything else and tends to correlate touch impressions, kinesthetic stimuluses and muscular stirrings with the outside world. It is not at all imperative to transform the tactile or kinesthetic experiences into the visual ones. In the event of being haptic, a learner totally depends on his or her self, the kinesthetic sensibilities and seeks to appropriate the learning objectives without the oft-employed ocular expertise. The haptic accomplishment is ideally suited to a learner of visual art-studies. The learner, in this case, remains quite satisfied with the piecemeal impressions that he receives through touch, body movement or muscular mobilizations. Normally, he will not weave these partial impressions into something creative. However, if the learner is ever emotively engaged with the object or phenomenon itself, he or she gets into creating something meaningful. The learner's senses here are the senses of values; the sensibilities are highly subjective.

Digital Terrains: Minimizing Discrimination

Thus, the haptic predispositions are far from being introspective, analytic or contingent, whereas the visual ones are essentially synthetic in nature. For an effective didactic-creative output, however, both these sensations are equally important. In other words, all sorts of sense-impressions including the emotional experiences of shape and form combined with the intellectual apprehensions of these features are cumulatively instrumental in facilitating a learner's passage to creativity. Both visual-mindedness and haptic proclivity, if fused in the right measure, give way to the desired academic outputs. Researchers in the field of pedagogy, however, have pinpointed a grave problem in this apparently bipartite system of learning. The mainstream academia asserts that visual perception is the most admissible of all perceptions, the eyes being the key intermediary. The finding that is not publicly stated is that all other sense-impressions are subordinate to those coming from the eye. Visual impressions, therefore, deliberately disregard the vital experiences like the tactile or the kinesthetic ones.

The brush with covid has only accentuated death, destruction and disasters. However, in the face of a common enemy like covid, whose mortal vengeance were long unknown, the whole society – irrespective of being low and high, shanty-huddlers or palace-inhabitants – stood as one single condominium whose doors and windows were fiercely shut against all viral onslaughts. Humankind quickly yet necessarily took to digital modes of interacting, especially learning. The digital terrains substituted the physical ones. The familiar school

room was now the small virtual cubicle on the laptop or smartphone. The digital boards replaced the sturdy classroom boards, the softcopy lessons the empirical textbooks. So many other media were graciously invited to make this virtual experience a user-friendly one. Times, rules, regulations and other prerequisites were altered or modified to help learners come to terms with this diametrically altered scenario. The redeeming aspect, however, was that the human teacher remained the same. Both to the learners and the teachers it was not unknown that the visual and the haptic concepts are fundamentally different in their basic experiential content. It was also not unknown that no unitary experience will ever endure – either visual or haptic. The digital exposure, however, brought a new whiff of experience among the learners. All other sense-impressions were of secondary importance in comparison to the visual perception. A learner's growing digital involvement, however, came as a good promise. The triggers for the formulation of the visual perception were now clear to a learner. What remained otherwise unexplored, unacknowledged or unmet in the parochiality of everyday was now more emphatically pronounced before the learning community. The making of teaching-learning curriculums, the ways of disseminating them, the practical hindrances in their digital imparting and the simultaneous urge for overcoming the associated ennui of a cloistered space – all these factors minimized the discriminatory attitude towards the seemingly insubstantial sense-impressions. It was either their forced deprivation or their heavily flaunted use that enkindled a special probing-zeal in the learners. That it was a discrimination was, at least, acknowledged.

A Passage to Interdisciplinarity

This valued acknowledgement is no small issue. In fact, the espousal of the non-discriminatory attitude is the first step towards accepting not just the yet-unacknowledged sense-impressions but the blurring of boundaries between disciplines. Just as no single sense-impression guides a learner to didactic-creative outputs, no single disciplinary premise really sustains. The forces championing interdisciplinarity had always already been in the academia, much prior to covid. However, its necessity was more fiercely felt in all sectors of life, even beyond chartered academia, only in the spurt of digital interactions during and after covid. There are criticisms that interdisciplinarity is, after all, a transgression of particular disciplinary boundaries, albeit in a very specific, historically and socially contextualized space. There are even accusations that epistemic frontiers fostered through interdisciplinarity are a challenge to disciplinary conventionality and thus, interdisciplinarity is a political contention. Like any other discipline, interdisciplinarity runs the risk of being institutionalized or totalizing in nature but there is no denying that, for a learner, this escalated potentiality is a way of interpreting a phenomenon from as many angles as possible – identity, science, life, culture, anthropology, technology and even today's medical humanities.

As many as three decades before this covid pandemic, Jean-Francois Lyotard saw the potentiality of complex “material machinery” and anticipated the need for the “correct use of the machinery”:

The idea of an interdisciplinary approach is specific to the age of deligitimation and its hurried empiricism. The relation to knowledge is not articulated in terms of the spirit or the emancipation of humanity, but in terms of the users of a complex conceptual and material machinery and those who benefit from its performance capabilities. They have at their disposal no metalanguage or metanarrative in which to formulate the final goal and correct use of that machinery. But they do have brainstorming to improve its performance. The emphasis placed on teamwork is related to the predominance of the performativity criterion in knowledge. (The Inhuman 52)

Lyotard's is thus a question of figuring out how the new-found dialogue with technology changes and interrogates the epistemological foundations of mainly human-centric disciplinary practice and cultural analysis. Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, as the digital paradigm takes over, a learner at least feels that interdisciplinarity is the call of the hour, for it promises to rise above cultural sectarianism, cartographic provincialism and holistic discrimination. The idea of common humanity, as the new digital

awareness vitally shows, is discriminatory, of course. Had there not been this digitally mediated man-machine cultural tete-a-tete, the discrimination would have perpetuated ad infinitum. In that case, humankind would have got a despotic liberty for exploitation. Bill Readings in his seminal *The University in Ruins* (1996) has rightly dissuaded humankind to deem them as exclusive "object of cognition":

Our responsibility to others is thus inhuman in the sense that the presumption of a shared or common humanity is an irresponsible desire to know what it is that we encounter in the other, what it is that binds us. To believe that we know in advance what it means to be human, that humanity can be an object of cognition, is the first step to terror, since it renders it possible to know what is non-human, to know what it is to which we have no responsibility, what we can freely exploit. Put simply, the obligation to others cannot be made an object of knowledge under the rubric of a common humanity. (190)

Conclusion

John Keats upholds in "The Eve of St. Agnes": "... 'Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land, / Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed:" (*Fifteen Poets* 373). Covid is not just "an elfin-storm", nor a "boon" by any means, but it serves, for sure, as a potential lens through which the humanity, more particularly the learning community, have seen the world. The time had been precarious, no doubt but then, no one denies the raw, pithy and priceless experience that the humanity has derived through it and all experience, we do agree, is an arch wherethrough gleams many untravelled worlds. Many worlds have really entered making a learner believe at least in the necessity of rising above discrimination. The digital turn has invited the learners to reconsider the cliched ties between the visual preconceptions of learning and the immediate surroundings. Moreover, it has paved the way for a new creative space and experience by acknowledging the fundamental *raison d'être* for interdisciplinarity, especially in the didactic-creative parlance. A learner, at least, knows that by way of learning to appreciate interdisciplinarity, she or he is turning towards the realization of what the present day deems as "posthuman". Regarding the de-centred concept of what is traditionally known as human, Arthur Kroker, hence, rightly observes: "The technological posthuman is that historical moment when the power of technology turns back on itself, effectively undermining traditional concepts such as subjectivity, privacy, and bounded consciousness in order to render all things truly uncertain and unknowable" (*Exits to the Posthuman Future* 15).

ⁱ *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* traces the origin of this epithet to Greek *haptikos*, which connotes bodily touch (640).

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