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A Study of 'Learning Experience During Online Classes In Undergraduate Students of Mass Communication'

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic impacted all spheres of human lives and education is not untouched by it. Across the world, educational institutions went into lockdown and the process of teaching-learning shifted to online mode. Through this study, an attempt has been made to analyse the impact of this shift from offline communication to online communication during lockdown and then again from online to hybrid mode or offline communication after COVID. The study focuses on students' learning experience during online, and hybrid classes of undergraduate students of Mass Communication in Patna, Bihar. Through this research, the researcher tried to examine how online learning changed students' engagement and motivation to learn, and the impact it has had on students' learning experience. The scope of this study is vast, especially in regional areas where technology is not easily penetrated and can be used in the future to further understand students' learning experiences during online classes.

The methodological approach of the study was mostly descriptive research. The study was largely exploratory and analytical in nature to understand how online education has helped and motivated students in learning during the pandemic. Using a mixed method approach, the study was largely qualitative with one overlapping quantitative approach which included Survey questionnaire, Participant Observation, and a Focus-Group Discussion with students. Throughout the study, the researcher attempted to present the data and its analysis in an unbiased and clear manner. The researcher tried to fully display the evidence and the analysis of evidence objectively through literature review, triangulation of data, thematic and content analysis for qualitative data, and percentage analysis for quantitative data, in order to satisfy methodological rigour, eliminate alternative interpretations and produce a useful work of research.

Keywords; Online Education, Learning Experience, Educational Technology, ICT4D

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all spheres of human lives and education is not untouched by it. Teaching-Learning has always been widely considered to be a face-to-face activity. However, since the onset of the worldwide pandemic, this method of teaching has changed. Across the world, educational institutions went into lockdown and the teaching-learning process shifted to online mode. With the Covid-19 pandemic, higher education institutions, as well as schools around the world, have found themselves in a rapid change in terms of teaching methods, pedagogy, quality assurance, and the well-being of academic staff and students. Given today's uncertainties, it is vital to gain a deeper understanding of students' online learning experience during COVID-19 pandemic. Although many researchers across the world have investigated this area, limited information is available regarding students' learning experiences pertaining to Bihar, which is one of the largest states in India. Through this study, an attempt has been made to analyse the impact of this shift from offline communication to online communication, where human interaction is comparatively limited. The study focuses on student's learning experience and their motivation during online classes of undergraduate students of Mass Communication in Patna, Bihar.

Through this research, I also examined how distance learning has changed students' engagement and motivation to learn, and the impact it has had on students' learning.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Yan et. al (2021) did a study that explored how students at different stages of their primary and secondary education reacted to full-time online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this study, the researchers conducted a province-wide survey in which the online learning experience of over 1.17 million Chinese students was collected from the Guangdong Province of China. The researchers performed cross-tabulation and Chi-square analysis to compare students' online learning conditions, experiences, and expectations. Results from this study provided evidence that students' online learning experiences are significantly different across different levels of schooling. Furthermore, in the study, it was also concluded that the students experienced various difficulties related to the delivery of online learning.

Another study was done in the Philippines by Barrot et. al (2021) to better understand the challenges and explore the specific strategies that students can employ to overcome those difficulties during online classes. Using a mixed-methods approach, the findings revealed that the online learning challenges of college students varied in terms of type and severity. Their greatest challenge was linked to their 'learning environment at home', while 'technological literacy and competency' was least challenging to them. The findings further revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic had the greatest impact on the quality of the learning experience and students' mental health.

Min-Ling Hung et al (2010) developed an Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS) through a confirmatory factor analysis, which was validated in five dimensions: self-directed learning, motivation for learning, computer/Internet self-efficacy, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy. The research which was conducted in Taiwan on 1051 college students who were enrolled in online courses, revealed that students' levels of readiness were high in computer/Internet self-efficacy, motivation for learning, and online communication self-efficacy and were low in learner control and self-directed learning. This study found that gender made no statistical differences in the five OLRS dimensions. Also, students in higher grades demonstrated noticeably more readiness in the areas of learner control, motivation for learning, and self-directed learning than students in lower grades.

Demei Shen et al (2013) tried to identify five dimensions of online learning self-efficacy: (a) self-efficacy to complete an online course, (b) self-efficacy to interact socially with classmates, (c) self-efficacy to handle tools in a Course Management System (CMS), (d) self-efficacy to interact with instructors in an online course, and (e) self-efficacy to interact with classmates for academic purposes. In addition, the role of demographic variables in online learning self-efficacy was investigated in the study which revealed that demographic variables, such as the number of online courses taken, gender, and academic status, predict online learning self-efficacy. Furthermore, the study found that online learning self-efficacy predicted students' online learning satisfaction.

Bere and Rambe (2016) did research on 223 tertiary students at a South African University of Technology. Findings suggest that device portability, communication cost, collaborative capabilities of device and learner control are the main drivers of flexible learning in mobile environments. Flexible learning context facilitated by learner control was found to have a positive influence on attitude towards mobile learning and exhibited the highest path coefficient of the overall model. The study implication is that educators need to create varied learning opportunities that leverage learner control of learning in mobile learning systems to enhance flexible mobile learning. A previous study done by Badge et al (2012) also showed that network visualisation can be an important curation tool for educators interested in cultivating student engagement.

However, online learning has disadvantages of its own. Various studies have found that the demographics of the learner might affect the outcomes of their online learning. Previous studies have found significant differences in learning, attitudes, motivation, or experiences based on gender, age, ethnicity, ability and confidence with online learning technology, the type of learning institution they attend (community college, undergraduate, graduate, business, corporate, government etc.), and learning effectiveness in the online environment.

Muilenburg & Berge (2005) did an exploratory factor analysis study that determined the underlying constructs that comprise student barriers to online learning. The eight factors found were (a) administrative issues, (b) social interaction, (c) academic skills, (d) technical skills, (e) learner motivation, (f) time and support for studies, (g) cost and access to the Internet, and (h) technical problems. The study also found out that independent variables also significantly influenced student ratings of these barrier

factors that included: gender, age, ethnicity, type of learning institution, self-rating of online learning skills, the effectiveness of learning online, online learning enjoyment, prejudicial treatment in traditional classes, and the number of online courses completed.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to understand the learning experience which includes motivation factors, participation, and eagerness to learn of undergraduate students in online classrooms during the Covid pandemic. The study explored the challenges faced by the students in the online classroom transaction process, interaction, and assessment. An attempt was made to know in what way students are participating in online classes and how it has helped in their teaching-learning process. The proposed study made an effort to know how online classes vis-a-vis traditional classes are perceived by undergraduate students of mass communication. Also, how it has helped in enhancing their learning, facilitating their personality development, understanding the different discourses, and their conceptualisation of knowledge. Through this study, an attempt was made to know the impact of online classrooms in the changing scenario and how it has helped in the learning process of the students during the pandemic, and can online education be an alternative for the future.

This study aimed to explore the effectiveness of online learning by gathering evidence from the students' experiences at the particular moment of their lives when they were learning through a pandemic. This research was helpful in understanding their levels of engagement in online classes during and after the lockdown. This study will be useful for teachers and students to effectively use remote learning so that students can be benefited to the maximum even during online education. This study provides educators with valuable information that will allow them to improve their teaching and guarantee all students a quality learning experience.

Statement Of The Problem And Scope

Research questions

- 1 What are the motivating factors students find in online classes, vis-à-vis traditional classes?
- 2 How do students visualise and participate in online classes where the interaction is limited?
- 3 What were the challenges the students faced during online learning?

Objectives of the study

- 1 To study the learning experience of undergraduate students in online classes
- 2 To study the learning of undergraduate students in online classes vis-à-vis traditional offline/ physical classes
- 3 To find the participation of undergraduate students in online classes
- 4 To study the challenges faced by undergraduate students in online classes

Scope (Delimitations of the Study)

- 1) The study was delimited to two colleges of Patna district of Bihar.
- 2) The study was further delimited to the students enrolled for Bachelors' in Mass Communication (BMC) Programmes of those two colleges of two different Universities

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Research Design

The methodological approach of the proposed research is descriptive research. The study is largely exploratory and analytical in nature to understand how online education has helped and motivated students in learning during the pandemic. Using a mixed method approach, the study is largely qualitative one overlapping quantitative approach. The study is a mixed method approach including a survey questionnaire, participant observation, and focus-group discussion with students.

Population Of The Study

The population of the study was selected as undergraduate college students of Mass Communication in the Patna district of Bihar. In Patna, there are four colleges that provide undergraduate degree courses in Mass Communication and Journalism. However, two colleges were selected on the basis of convenience sampling, i.e. Patna Women's College and St. Xavier's College of Management and Technology.

Sample Of The Study

The universe of the sample was Patna district of Bihar. The sample was collected from undergraduate students of mass communication from two selected colleges of Patna. Out of those two selected colleges, 50 students from each college were randomly selected, those who filled out the google form. Approximately, the sample size was 100 undergraduate students of mass communication in the two colleges. The data was collected from the following colleges:

S.No.	Name of the College	Number of Student
	Patna Women's College, Patna University	50 undergraduate students
2.	St Xavier's College of Management and Technology, Aryabhata Knowledge University	50 undergraduate students
		Total: 100 students

Tools And Techniques Used For Data Collection

The study followed a mixed-method approach including a questionnaire, personal observation, and focus-group discussion, which were the tools and techniques that were used for the study. One Survey questionnaire was developed by the researcher that was administered to the students. There were both open-ended and closed-ended questions in the questionnaire. The learning experience of the students was collected through a 'Questionnaire' and one 'Focus Group Discussion' was held among the students. Furthermore, a 'Participant Observation' by the educator was done- to obtain qualitative data for in-depth analysis and insight into the problems and prospects related to the situation under study. Using a mixed method approach, the study was largely qualitative with one overlapping quantitative approach.

- Survey through a questionnaire (Google Form) from students
- 'Focus Group Discussion' (Representatives from three different session batches of Mass Communication)
- Participant Observation by the educator

This research work followed a **Mixed method approach**, to come to a suitable unbiased conclusion by the **method of Triangulation**. In this research work, triangulation and mixed methods were used to minimise the concerns over objectivity and lack of rigour. The data were analysed objectively by comparing data output from different research methods, with the existing literature, and finally, the analysis was concluded with the help of triangulation of data.

This research had the following approaches, which have been explored in the sections mentioned below:

Quantitative Method: Survey through Questionnaire (collected via Google Form)

Qualitative Method: 'Focus Group Discussion' and 'Participant Observation'

A. Survey Through Questionnaire

The questionnaire had 19 questions in all, in which 18 were close-ended/ optional/ Multiple Choice options whereas one last question gave the respondents to share their experience or any feedback or comments related to the online classes during COVID lockdown. The questionnaire was divided into three important closed-ended sections and the last section with an optional open-ended question. :

(i) **Section 1:** The first section asked questions related to demographics and general issues pertaining to online classes.

(ii) **Section 2:** The second section of the questionnaire required the respondents to fill out questions related to 'Self-directed Learning during Online Classes'.

(iii) **Section 3:** The third section inquired about 'Learner control (in an online context)'.

(iv) **Section 4:** The last section has one open-ended optional question related to the feedback on students' learning experience.

B. Focus Group Discussion

The participants were selected through 'purposive sampling' from a sample of 100 participants, whose data were collected via survey with the help of Google Forms. A total of 08 participants were approached for the FGD but only 05 participants marked their presence on the date of discussion. The participants of the FGD were from all three batches of undergraduate Mass Communication Courses. There were two participants from 2019-2022, two from 2020-2023, and one participant from the 2021-2023 session batch. The 05 selected students met virtually through ZOOM for approximately 50 minutes. Issues collected through the questionnaire were analysed, and where appropriate, further explored during the FGD. Furthermore, the following questions were asked by the moderator during the 'Focus Group Discussion' for further discussion:

- What has your online learning experience been as a student?
- What did you like about it? What didn't you like about it?
- How does it compare with your experience as a student in a physical classroom?
- In the future, if you could choose, would you want to do more online learning? If so, why? If not, why not?

C. Participant Observation

“Ethnography is a method wherein the scholar embeds himself in the relations under study, spending long periods of time with research subjects” (Khan 2012). This study also included one of the qualitative methods of research i.e. ‘Participant Observation’. In order to understand the learning experience of the students, it was necessary to understand their background, the challenges, and the limitations faced by the learners such as distractions in the learning environment, technological issues, or any other factor influencing their learning during online classes. While working at one of the chosen institutions - St. Xavier’s College of Management and Technology - as an Assistant Professor, the researcher personally observed three batches of mass communication (2018-2021, 2019-2022, and 2020-2023) in both online and offline contexts. The data has been collected through personal experience and notes, during the course of one and a half years (August 2020 - February 2022). In this research, considering the researcher’s circumstances, ‘Participant Observation’ arises from the ongoing working situation and fits the purpose of the research. Data for participant observation have been collected through communications with the learners during the course of teaching for 18 months, wherein the researcher created a rapport with the students before conducting the study, to obtain quality data.

The research study draws upon the lead researcher’s experiences and the experiences of others during three phases of lockdown during COVID that resulted in online classes. The researcher made notes based on her observations during online classes, personal thoughts and feelings based on her experiences, interactions with the students, and so on. Hence, the study is an ‘inquiry from the inside’; the author has included subjective material, and written about her own experience as an educator. The objectivity, the analysis, and the reflection came later, at the time of writing the paper. The researcher went through four phases of ‘Participant Observation’ which are as follows:

Phase 1: The researcher created a rapport with the students before conducting the study, in order to obtain quality data.

Phase 2: Since the researcher was working as an Educator (Assistant Professor) in one of the selected colleges, she was ‘in the field’ during all phases of lockdown during COVID, partial lockdown (where a blended form of learning took place) and also during offline classes. During

this phase, she blended in the field in order to record quality observations and tried to be unbiased and objective during the data collection process.

Phase 3: During this phase, the researcher made notes based on her observations during online classes, personal thoughts and feelings based on her experiences, interactions with the students and so on. The researcher tried to be unbiased and objective during the data collection process.

Phase 4: In the last phase of ‘Participant Observation’, the researcher has analysed the data and presented the findings in a ‘Narrative Analysis’ format.

Procedure Of The Data Collection

List of the students along with their contact details was collected through the Professors of the colleges (St. Xavier’s College of Management and Technology and Patna Women’s College). Furthermore, more contacts and data for the survey questionnaire were collected through ‘Snowballing techniques’. The secondary data was collected from the students with a request that the data/information sought is for the purpose of the study only.

Primary data, both quantitative and qualitative, were collected for the study by administering one questionnaire that was specially developed for the students, and also by conducting a Focus Group Discussion, and Personal Observation, which the researcher did herself. The questionnaires were sent to the students through WhatsApp by generating a Google Form Link and were received back from them within the maximum period of two months. All the data collected by 100 respondents have been stored in Google Forms.

For the ethnographic research ‘Participant Observation’, the researcher collected data by creating a rapport with the students before conducting the study, in order to obtain quality data. Since the researcher was working as an Educator (Assistant Professor) in one of the selected colleges, she was ‘in the field’ during all phases of lockdown during COVID, partial lockdown (where blended form of learning took place) and also during offline classes. During this phase, she blended in the field in order to record quality observation. The researcher made notes based on her observations during online classes, personal thoughts and feelings based on her experiences, interactions with the students and so on.

Lastly, for Focus Group Discussion, the researcher personally sought permission from the respondents before

conducting the research and before holding the FGD with concerned students. The entire 50 minutes of the discussion was both audio and video recorded, which was convenient at the time of FGD. Proper notes of the FGD responses were taken and word-to-word transliteration was done.

Procedure Of Data Analysis And Interpretation Of Data

The data obtained is analysed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques of data analysis. Quantitative data obtained from close-ended questions through the 'Survey Questionnaire' has been analysed using a simple method of 'Percentage Analysis' and 'Central Tendencies'. The

qualitative data/information collected through open-ended questions, and 'Focus Group Discussion' has been analysed through content analysis, which has been presented in a 'Thematic Analysis' format. Lastly, for 'Participant Observation', the researcher has analysed the data and presented the findings in a 'Narrative Analysis' format. The findings are accordingly interpreted, including personal reflections on the findings based on qualitative data. Based on the responses of students, focus-group discussion, and participant observation method, an attempt was made to know how students visualise the learning process in online classrooms.

I am not distracted by other online activities when learning online (instant messages, Internet surfing).

100 responses

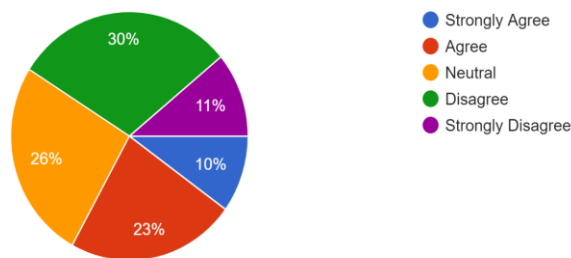


Figure 1.1 'Distractions During Online Learning'

If yes, what distraction did you mostly face while attending online classes?

100 responses

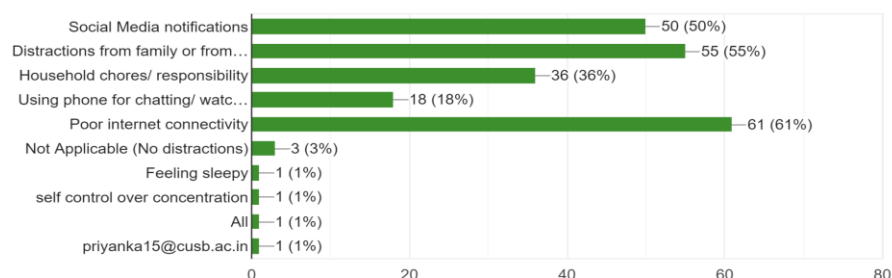


Figure 1.2 Reasons Of Distraction

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND BRIEF DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

After the method of triangulation, from the Survey Questionnaire, Focus Group Discussion, and Participant Observation, there were some major findings of the study related to online learning which are as following:

Online classes less effective in the long-term: The initial experience of students during online classes was good but gradually, over a period of time, students complained of losing interest, and found online learning boring and ineffective. Many complained of a lack of attention and frequent distractions.

Practical Studies better in Offline Classes: Online Learning was mostly theoretical. However, there was almost negligible scope for practical training. For Practical learning, offline classes are preferable by the students.

Distraction is common during online classes: One of the most common aspects related to online learning was 'distraction'. In not only FGD but also during the survey, almost 90% of the participants agreed that they were distracted during online classes. 'Poor internet connectivity', 'family and surroundings', and 'social media notifications' were marked as the top three factors which caused the highest level of distraction during online classes, with more than 50% of the respondents sharing while recalling their online experience of attending classes. Furthermore, since many students were staying at home with their families, they had 'household chores' to do while attending online classes, which was also one of the causes of the distractions. The other reasons for distractions while attending online classes mentioned by the respondents are 'using the phones for chatting', 'watching videos', 'feeling drowsy' and 'lack of self-control' to concentrate.

Self-directed learning is essential: For the learners, self-directed learning becomes vital during online classes including being disciplined and attentive, being consciously aware of distractions, avoiding procrastination, making notes for later use, going through the study materials shared by the professors, and so on.

Use of interactive materials by educators: Audio-visual learning material, interactive apps such as polls, quizzes or whiteboards, etc. can be used by the educators during online teaching as it helps in grabbing the attention of the students and therefore, avoids distractions. Educators need to think of more interesting and engaging ways of getting students' attention during online mode. Also, the students required more guidance from the educators during online classes than in offline classes.

Use of Social Media to gain the attention of students: The findings also suggest that students are keen users of Social media even during online classes. The students get notifications on their phones constantly which was the major cause of distraction. However, it can be used as a boon, and hence, it may be recommended that lecturers and tutors should consider incorporating social media platforms in their teaching.

Personal bonding is rare during Online classes: Interaction was missing during online classes, which is more

evident during offline classes where the teaching-learning is often done face-to-face. Peer-to-peer interaction as well as Educator-Pupil interaction, both are important for effective learning.

Technological skill is a major hindrance during Online Classes: When the education system switched from the traditional offline mode to online mode, one of the biggest challenges was to cope up with technology. Many students struggled with these skills during the online classes. Not only the students but even educators faced the issue of having competence with technology. Many students and educators alike felt difficulty in learning all the technical know-how of conducting online classes on new softwares such as MS Teams.

Infrastructural issues: During the survey questionnaire, many students reported that the network problems and technical glitches were one of the issues while attending online classes. This problem was also highlighted during the Focus Group Discussion. However, this issue was also used as an excuse by a few students when they wanted to avoid answering in class or were not paying attention to what the teacher was saying.

Examination and evaluation are not completely honest in online mode: It was also found out that many students knew to use unfair means while giving online examinations. Since even the software has limitations, and the students were being evaluated from the confinement of their homes, few students leveraged this opportunity to cheat during online examinations.

Online Classes are better when there are limitations: The participants during FGD as well as the respondents during the survey questionnaire, agreed that if there are limitations such as COVID lockdown, or financial/ personal limitations with the learner, then online classes are better. Otherwise, in general scenarios offline classes are always better. The students are willing to opt for online courses when either the paper is completely theoretical or while pursuing multiple courses at the same time. For practical courses, or if they don't have any limitations, then the students would rather go for offline classes.

STUDENTS' OPINION ABOUT MOTIVATION DURING LEARNING

The response by a few students revealed that in comparison to traditional offline classes, they felt less motivated in the online classes. Initially, the students were excited, as they didn't have to go to college to attend classes,

but later on, that excitement level dropped. Some students worked part-time or with their parents, while others had household chores to do alongside their studies. This directly impacted the students and their motivation, as sometimes they could not attend classes or were not attending attentively.

The qualitative results from the questionnaire and FGD indicated that it was challenging for most of the students to concentrate and have self-discipline due to many distractions, which reduced the students' motivation. Several students expressed that they felt alone in their studies, and could not feel connected to the teacher or with their classmates, which also influenced their motivation. However, the students felt motivated to participate in online classes when there was any fun activity such as games, videos, quizzes, puzzles, etc during the online classes, yet it required comparatively more effort to stay motivated throughout the class.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

A successful digital conversion for classrooms is not determined by the technology, but by how technology enables teaching and learning. The purpose of this study was to document higher education students' learning experience during online mode, and align the findings with the broader learning research pool. With the Covid-19 pandemic, education institutions found themselves in a rapid change in terms of teaching methods, pedagogy, quality assurance, and the well-being of academic staff and students. Through this study, an attempt was made to understand the challenges faced by the students in the online classroom transaction process, interaction, and assessment.

It can be concluded that online learning was a viable option in times of crisis and can be used as an alternative. Many students had good experiences from it and they learnt new things, while some said it is easier to access with limited resources and from the confinement of their homes. However, many students didn't have a good experience at all and they found online learning ineffective. Constant distraction during online classes, lack of appropriate infrastructure and network issues was one of the biggest challenges that the learners had to face. Few students came from financially humble backgrounds which made it difficult for them to demand separate mobile phones from their guardians. Many students also realised that factors such as self-motivation, learner-control, self-directed learning, etc. are essentials of online learning.

The researcher also tried to inculcate innovative methods of teaching-learning during online classes such as creating a breakout room (in which the class can be divided into sub-groups which was a closed group and more intimate); using whiteboards and allowing students to use it as well during the classes; usage of audio, video, images and interactive materials; dictation of notes in between to grab the attention of the students; usage of presentations to emphasise bullet points and so on. After getting the feedback from the students, it was found out that the students found it really interesting and could get a sense of togetherness, especially if it is peer-to-peer interaction. Also, the usage of different study materials and interactive materials kept the class interested as compared to the usual class lectures. Although, in offline classes, these many efforts are not required by the educators, but during online classes, in order to keep students attentive, extra effort is required by the educator. It can be said from the experience of the researcher, that this has a direct effect on the learning experience of the students.

Adding to which, it can be stated that educators need to think of more interesting and engaging ways of getting students' attention during online mode. Also, the students required more guidance by the educators during online classes than in offline classes. Online education can be improved by providing flexible learning scenarios, building an interactive relationship with students, and developing situations where more peer interaction and involvement can be done, such as paired or group presentations/ assignments. Use of social media, interactive apps and softwares, whiteboards, quiz apps, etc. can be used as some of the options by the educators to enhance students' learning experience during online classes.

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