Contrast between physical and virtual classroom

by
Hemantha Kulatunga

It is now a commonly known fact that Covid-19 has caused worldwide destruction and devastation in ways nobody anticipated. Since the breakout, the life the world knew has gone through many transformations regardless of the economic status of countries. Educational institutions throughout the globe were forced to abandon physical classroom activities to stop the spread of the deadly virus.

In Sri Lanka, due to the rapidity of the infectivity of the virus, lockdowns, and other stringent health restrictions, over 10,000 schools countrywide were compelled to close temporarily, disowning education to over 4.2 million school children and nearly 90,000 university students in the country.

Students were deprived of physical classroom education continuously for more than eighteen months. As in many other countries, the educational institutions, both Government and private, took to online teaching which was unknown territory for students of all ages until then.

Initially, many people anticipated that learning from the comfort of homes can be convenient, effective, and relaxing rather than rushing to schools with strict timings. However, the feeling of comfort was over soon as online education has taken a huge toll on both the mental and physical health of students as well as a majority of teachers.

Online teaching

The general opinion is that even though all schools were reopened recently, online teaching and learning are there to stay forever, perhaps to a lesser extent. Many online channels that came into function through digital media platforms during the closure of schools have become hugely popular among students.

One cannot argue the effectiveness of online teaching due to multiple reasons. Nevertheless, educationists and medical experts have discovered that the method encompasses many negative psychological, physical, and social impacts.

According to the expert opinion of prominent psychologists in Sri Lanka, the biggest threat is posed through the misuse and abuse of mobile phones by students, particularly teenagers. An alarming trend of mobile phone misuse has emerged both in urban and rural areas. In Sri Lanka, particularly in rural areas, the technological know-how of the parents, in most cases, is limited. Hence, the supervision of the usage of mobile devices is difficult with adult teens.

With the easy accessibility of thousands of computer games and many other nefarious apps and information, a student at any age can get addicted to unwelcome territories. Yet, the coronavirus pandemic has left parents with little option but to continue online studies, taking additional responsibility of being alert about the activities of their children.

Computer games

Addiction to computer games is one of the most disturbing trends among youth around the world today. This can easily be the most damaging criteria for the mental well-being of children of all ages. Most of the parents are worried that it was getting more difficult to distract children from mobile phone usage.

The trend of students getting

NO DOUBT THAT ONLINE EDUCATION ALSO HAS MANY POSITIVE SIDES SUCH AS FLEXIBILITY IN LEARNING, EASE OF ACCESSIBILITY OF TIME AND PLACE, ABSENCE OF NORMAL CLASSROOM PRESSURE, EFFICIENCY, AND SUITABILITY TO VARIED LEARNING STYLES, AND SO ON

hooked on playing computer games on the pretext of online learning is rapidly increasing. Students, specifically those in teens, have found various ways to deceive and trick adults to find ways and means to play computer games or engage themselves in other despicable acts. During an online lesson, they can use the same device for other activities even when the camera is switched on.

The total business value worldwide on computer games is said to be a staggering US$ 137 billion annually. The biggest threat is the constant attempts of computer game promoters to draw youngsters to these games by relentless online pop-ups and other methods due to the lucrative financial implications. A graphical user interface (GUI) display suddenly appears as a small window on the screen, tempting children to respond.

In addition, the promoters attract youth by introducing various types of game competitions, sometimes offering rewards as well. According to experts, these games are designed to aim the frame of minds children and youth to get obsessed with the game.

The situation worldwide in the world is so grave, the World Health Organization, in 2019 May, officially voted to adopt the International Classification of Diseases or ICD to include an entry on 'gaming disorder'. According to WHO, the criteria does not include a certain amount of hours spent in games but someone incapable of stopping playing and going through other routines in everyday life qualifies to be a patient.

Misuse of electronic devices

Many factors are affecting the misuse of mobile technology. Students have reported a feeling of discouragement, boredom, confusion, and anxiety. All these factors are possible elements for a student to switch to other online applications during their online lessons.

Also, reasons such as quality of connectivity disinterest in the subject, poor teaching styles, and inappropriate study settings can drive a student towards device misuse.

Some of the students this writer has had discussions with stated that they are not entirely satisfied with the quality of their online education enforced due to the pandemic. Some of them said that online learning has negatively affected their academic performance.

Long hours continuously in online learning can create monotony that leads to a lack of interest. Humans are social animals and boredom can settle in if interactions do not exist sufficiently. Particularly, a long time alone and listening to the same person can make young students lose interest in the subject, or may even produce animosity.

Most students cannot keep up with online teaching due to the pressure of concentration within an isolated environment. Once again, the unavailability of interactions physically with the teacher and the other participants can produce stress and anxiety, according to medical specialists. This can prompt them to switch, on the sly, to other means of online relaxation such as games, movies or, other entertainment apps.

Blue light effect

Another critical aspect of continuous usage of mobile electronic devices that medical experts consider seriously is the blue light effects. In simple terms, blue light is the blue-ray emissions from electronic devices that can harm the human sleep cycle and create a few other complications.

According to some experts, as little as two hours of exposure to blue light at night can slow down or stop the release of the sleep hormone, melatonin. Harvard Medical School, through a journal, reveals that the blue light may contribute to the causation of cancer, diabetes, heart diseases, and obesity.

Therefore, parents must limit children's screen time not only to regularise sleep patterns but also to protect their eyes.

Human eyes do not filter blue light and excessive exposure can also lead to nearsightedness and attention focusing issues in the long run. Students must be made aware that they have to put away electronic devices at least thirty minutes before bedtime.

Physical classroom

No doubt that online education also has many positive sides such as flexibility in learning, ease of accessibility of time and place, absence of normal classroom pressure, efficiency, and suitability to varied learning styles, and so on.

Nevertheless, apart from the negative issues discussed above, without the physical classroom, the students deprive themselves of socialising with other students where they learn life lessons. They lose the opportunity of associating with people of similar social and cultural settings which can lead to isolation later in adult life.

The student-teacher interaction, one of the most important aspects of a budding child, is taken away from students with online education methods. Classroom learning allows a child to actively participate in the discussion physically.

This provides a dynamic learning experience: whereas in e-learning, the interaction is remote through e-mails, chats, forums, and webinars, and so on. Also, in e-learning students study in a confinement and need to be self-motivated to continue with proper focus.

The generation born since 2009 known as 'Generation Alpha' or digital natives who are digital tech-savvy will be the generation the world will see from now on.

Hence, no one can dispute the use of digital technology in schools to teach future generations. Hence, the solution is to adequately educate the young generation about the repercussions of the misuse or abuse of digital technology. It is time for the educational authorities to open discussions to devise a suitable policy framework and drive the Government to implement such policies.