Experiences on Law Teaching in Times of Pandemic from India

By:

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The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new. ~ Socrates

The pandemic has caused upheaval in the world as we know it and has phenomenally changed the ways of learning. The lockdown was announced towards the end of March 2020 when most educational institutions across India that were residential, decided to send the students home. As young academicians, Dr. Biswanath Gupta teaches at The Jindal Global Law School (JGLS), whereas Ms. Anwesha Pal teaches at The W.B. National University of Juridical Sciences (NUJS).

The ongoing pandemic has not only changed our social relationships, it has brought a giant change in the University teaching pedagogy too. Face-to-face classroom teaching has been replaced by virtual mode of teaching. These online class-rooms have become the closest equivalent to the physical class-

rooms now. Though, many popular online learning platforms existed even prior to the pandemic, the widespread use of virtual platforms have started only since the lockdown. The following is a combined account of our experiences while dealing with online classes.

It was the winter semester of 2020 in which Ms. Pal offered to teach Company Law and International Investment Law, whereas Dr. Gupta was mid-way through his course in Public International Law. The syllabus was on its way into completion at NUJS when all students had to leave the city for their homes. The subsequent evaluation of the subjects went largely unaffected, although with the discovery of shocking realities relating to socio-economic divide dealt with in the last section of this blog.

Teaching online has been an experience which was different from classroom teaching that we had conducted in the past. The classes were to be conducted online via Google meet and every class could not be longer than an hour. In addition to this, syllabus had to be modified to cut down on the topics that were majorly debate or discussion based and to include more substantive law based topics owing to the limitations of engaging all students in group discussions and the glaring impediment of explaining concepts real time by the blackboard method. At JGLS, the summer semester began in August, 2020 where it was decided that the classes would be conducted on Microsoft teams subscribed to by the university itself out of its own funds.

In the online teaching at NUJS, sessions were scheduled in four slots throughout the week with only one-hour of class in each session. The advantage in these sessions was that attendance was automatically recorded by an extension add-on feature to the Google meet window, hence, no time was wasted in taking attendance and roll calls. On the other hand, due to limited data packs, students insisted on keeping their videos turned off. However a handful of students asked questions regularly, there were many students who were unresponsive, to the extent that even after the class was over and all students had logged out, there were still three to four students who were found logged in to the call still. At JGLS, owing to the lack of face to face interaction between the instructor and the students, there was a problem of student absenteeism that was noted. Students were not very enthusiastic about attending classes online and the attendance dropped sharply within a few weeks time of starting

out with the online mode of teaching.

One insight the instructors have garnered from online teaching is the need to restrict one's syllabus topics. For the course on Banking Law, in a one hour class, in between recap of previous class topics very briefly and revising the topics taught in the class at the end, there was little time left to engage students in a meaningful discussion or to quiz them about current awareness. More often than not students would refer to online information from not-so credible sources by making an ad-hoc Google enquiry instead of engaging in the habit of reading credible newspapers, blogs or articles which was the norm when classroom teaching used to happen. Since explaining concepts through mere words was difficult, owing to the lack of blackboards, the time taken to explain the concepts and address the questions took up most of the time in the one-hour class session. At JGLS however, the conduct of classes went in a structured way where a course manual was provided to students with suggested readings. Students were given the option to engage in post class sessions with research assistants and sometimes the instructor for understanding the lecture better. Assessments were mostly in the form of take-home tests and research paper submissions. Additionally moot problems were also given to engage students in activities during the semester.

The biggest challenge of all was to find out ways to ensure that students were learning the subject in the whole process. In our short careers as instructors, we have often found that some students in each class were more comfortable in discussing their doubts and observations privately instead of the entire class. However during the online mode of teaching at NUJS, it was found that students asked questions and posted their observations via emails, very few times. Lack of personal accessibility of the teacher was discouraging for many students who would on other occasions come to meet with their teacher in their chambers. Prior appointments on skype or phone were not a very comfortable mode of communication for them either. It affects the way an instructor conducts his/her lectures too, considering the best ways to teach that inculcates student learning.

We have been strong believers that teaching did not only constitute lecturing. Mentorship and discussion on the contemporary issues relating to the subject, in the political front formed an integral part of imparting education. A

professional course such as law which prepares students for the courtrooms and higher education needs to include much more than mere monotonous lectures on legal topics. But at JGLS, with the lack of face-to-face engagement with the students, they became absent-minded, became non-responsive in online classes and would seldom follow up with the readings for the class.

With the online mode of teaching becoming the order of the day there is scarce face-to-face contact that happens, and student mentoring has taken a back seat. Instructors main concern now happens to be to finish the syllabus within the stipulated time and ensure the concepts have been reasonably understood. With no access to blackboards or other classroom aides, it is a race against time that teachers are facing these days. Due to the disabled visuals, it is very difficult as an instructor to know if all the students who have logged in are also present and listening to the lectures. At NUJS it is also difficult to call upon the students in a class of 62 and ask questions within the same one hour. To ensure that students learnt the concepts being taught in the classroom, a question was posted on Google Classroom used for general discussions and conveying information to students, the evening before the class and students were asked to research on it and be prepared with an answer. The question was mostly a concept that included an overview of other concepts to be taught in the class that day. This exercise helped greatly in connecting with students who read up and had observations on the class lecture topics which they would convey via email or post on Google classroom.

To sum up our observations, the amount of time that was devoted to course design and planning during teaching online was much more than what we had to devote during classroom teaching. Moreover, student learning could not be ensured satisfactorily as barring the vocal few in the class it was difficult to pay personal attention to students and mentor them, and the mode of assessment through open book examinations had the risk of students submitting collaborative work which was impossible to check conclusively.

Socio-Economic Challenges

Being confronted with one of the realities of the socio-economic divide was during evaluation at NUJS for the winter semester of 2019-20. Since the examinations were cancelled for the aforementioned semester, the internal

component's marks were increased proportionately to cover the credits allotted for each subject. Therefore, for assessments, students were asked to turn in research papers that had to be a 3500 words non-plagiarized analytical work on a given topic of student's choice. While dealing with this component of assessment and evaluation in the previous semester, when the lockdown was freshly announced, it is pertinent to mention that although most submissions of the research paper came in by the stipulated deadline, there were three students who could not turn in their papers. Since the reason for the delay was also not communicated by them and assessment had to be sent to the academic section, they were marked absent for the test. It was then that emails were found by those three students who expressed their inability to submit the assessment owing to the absence of internet connectivity. These students came from the remotest parts of the country which seldom had electricity and absolutely cut off from any kind of internet connectivity. One of them being visually impaired too, found it much harder to say the least.

In the news report, with the rising number of students belonging to families with limited means, ending their lives owing to disillusionment about continuing studies via electronic gadgets and heavy data packs of internet, such a reality seems to have been hitherto unknown to a lot many academicians of the country. Adding to the students' woes, unfortunately, conventional scholarship amounts do not seem to cover these expenses either.

To be faced with such realities as a teacher, who has taught only at urban universities for over half a decade that something as mundane as online submissions of research papers in this age of digitalization, when most work is carried out with the use of internet, cannot be done due to the aforementioned impediments (Shahabuddin Mohammad, Sept 25, 2020), was humbling. It makes one aware of the cocoon that one lives in with all amenities such as to consider the access to electricity and internet facilities as something "basic" to education and existence, these days. The situation was not very different with few students at JGLS where they complained of poor internet connectivity in their homes and lack of a separate space for studying online.

With the world moving towards a new era of digitalization, an efficient infrastructure is required to carry out all that a human mind can envisage. In the ancient times, imparting education to students sitting in various parts of the world from the comforts of one's home would have been unimaginable.

However, it is one the biggest challenges that academicians today are facing around the world. One can only think that if University teaching can get affected so much, what would be the plight of primary and secondary schools situated in remote parts of the world that are still reeling under terrible infrastructure, sometimes which are as fundamental as electricity.

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