

# Online Learning amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: an Analysis of Bhutanese Context

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**Abstract:** Contact teaching has always been a common practice in Bhutanese Education System. But the COVID-19 pandemic threatened its stability and has mandated the shift in the way to cater to the need of learners. In the face of such adversity administration of online education came as an appropriate antidote. The transaction to online teaching took place in March 2020 with the detection of the first case of COVID -19 along with rising number of imported cases owing to the return of Bhutanese from abroad. This article portrays the ability of Bhutan to continue education in the midst of lockdown through online learning platforms and reaching out the unreached through distribution of SIM (self-instructional materials) for various key stages. This modus operandi took care of every individual student. No one was left behind in terms of their achievement of the expected learning outcomes.

Bhutan's experiences can intensify everyone's attention towards sensitizing both teachers and learners on different modes of online delivery to engage learners meaningfully during unforeseen times. Furthermore, it can serve as a catalyst in bettering future preparation through teacher professional development.

**Keywords:** Contact Teaching; Online Learning; COVID 19 Pandemic; Bhutanese Education System; Lockdown; Self Instructional Materials; Education in Emergency

## Introduction

Bhutan is a mountainous country nestled between two most populous countries- China in the north and India in the south. Despite sandwiched between two giant countries, it has always succeeded in preserving its identity under the benevolent reign of Wangchuck dynasty. Having recognized the education as a basic right and lynchpin towards achieving Gross National Happiness, basic education is being offered free to its citizen. Gross National Happiness is a middle path development philosophy adopted by Bhutan where people's wellbeing are given utmost importance over material acquisition.

General public have never failed to take advantage of the gift of free education and always worked darned sight towards getting their children enrolled in a school no matter what kind of challenges were encountered. Contact teaching has been rooted in Bhutanese Education System ever since the birth of education. Contact teaching where teaching and learning take place in an actual classroom. This practice of teaching has

impacted the various aspects of Bhutanese lives for generations and generations. It has become some sort of comfort zone to rely on. But the COVID-19 pandemic endangered our sense of security. It mandated the alteration of the way education is provided. With lockdown and closure of schools, contact teaching became impossible but the education had to go on as it has always been. The only way to sustain it was to resort to online delivery. Detection of the first COVID-19 case in March 2020 accounted to shutting down of schools in the proximal areas (MoE, REC & BCSEA, 2020). Gradually, all schools were closed with the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the country.

Lengthy closure was a great concern for it impedes children's learning. Facilitation of programs to ensure continuity of learning became need of the hour. Ministry of Education in partnership with Royal Education Council, Bhutan Council for School Examination and Assessment and other pertinent organizations took up the role in materializing that need through designing multitudes of programs and

rolling out Education in Emergency (EiE). The cybernetic age has fetched along a more than enough of new stimulating opportunities to learn and teach (Sadoux, 2017). Delivery of lesson through numerous ways reached out to children residing in every corner of the country thus could keep learners engaged in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset students were sorted out into accessibility and non- accessibility to technology to find out what kind of means needed to design to reach out every student. For those with accessibility they had the choice of learning through television, radio, and WeChat and google classroom. Those who were deprived of such accessibility, were provided SIM (Self-Instructional Materials).

## **Diverse Modes of Curriculum Delivery**

### **Television**

Group of volunteer teachers under the guidance of Ministry of Education took up the responsibility of delivering lesson through national television broadcasting service. Lesson delivery were categorized into various key stages and scheduling were drawn and notified through various social media in advance to enable the recipient to prepare accordingly. Aired lessons were constantly bettered through comments from different stakeholders. Munene & Mutsotso, 2019 supported the fact that audio visual learning generates a thought-provoking and interactive setting with content and involve in manful teaching and learning practices. It aids teacher to present the lesson commendably and learners acquire and retain the conceptions well and for great extent. It supports to eradicate abstracts concepts through filmic staging.

Educators are stimulated to retrieve and use television as teaching and learning tool. Children absorb in a different way and television offer instructors the chance to motivate each child's learning process with a blend of images, sound and attention seizing media. Television can effect teaching and learning process because it spreads the multitudes at once. The content to be broadcasted, if monitored as it should be by the concerned stakeholder prior to reaching the directed group can be valuable. Learning through television can instill the sense of punctuality and time management because it cannot be done on some other time like other means of learning. Though students found broadcasted lessons impactful, they were of the view that they missed most of the lessons due to disruption in power supply. Furthermore, it was experienced as not so user friendly because lesson had to be attended at the time of broadcast.

They didn't have the liberty to replay at their convenient time.

### **Google Classroom**

Google Classroom is a learning management tool for schools intended to streamline the design, dissemination and assessment of students' task in a paperless environment (Iftekhhar, 2016). It is one of the finest mechanism for improving teachers' work ethics. Google Classroom assist learners in keeping their entire work in a systematic way. It is accessible to everyone with Google Apps for Education.

All teachers and students with the exception of class III and below were provided education mail to enable them to access google classroom. Familiarization on its usage were advocated in previous year. Class teachers played pivotal role in creating a google classroom and inviting subject teachers and students accordingly. Scheduling were drawn to avoid overburdening of students with tasks. Teachers could easily detect strugglers owing to the tracing tools linked with given work. The possibility of attachment of you tube or any link for instructional purpose made the learning realistic. Keeler, (2014) is of the view that Google classroom inspire cooperation between learners. Google Classroom facilitates teacher to conduct the class practically from anywhere and anytime. Initially students turn in rate was not very satisfactory but with time drastic improvement was noticed. This clearly indicates the need to keep in touch on regular basis. Platforms need to be created for learners to fiddle with all kinds of learning devices to make best use during unanticipated times. Though Government provided internet data package at subsidized rate to students, low internet speed was a barrier to implement Google Classroom efficiently.

### **WeChat**

WeChat is a Chinese app that is used to communicate, in writing or virtually face-to-face or voice-to-voice. Bhutanese are well versed in the use of WeChat. Sadoux (2017), pointed out the fact that WeChat is an extremely widespread prompt messenger easing communication through a media rich environment that can be used simultaneously, non-simultaneously or semi-simultaneously with voice or text messages. Every class teacher is required to create a WeChat forum for their class involving concerned parents and subject teachers to notify any issues concerning their children. Of late, such forum are used for delivering lessons for classes III

and below. Parents were entrusted critical role in guiding and sending their child's work to the respective subject teachers. Lesson delivery through this means have heighten parental role in educating their child. Parents were reminded time and again when they fail to submit their child's work on time. Reminders kept them at toes to carry out their parental role without fail. These techniques have catered the needed attention to a child, thus generated ambience to realize child's learning potential. Child's work can be assessed and send back for them to follow up. Teacher could capture video lesson on some of the difficult topics and upload through WeChat for students to comprehend. Students can get their doubt elucidated either through voice message or text messages.

### **SIM (Self-Instructional Materials)**

Self-instructional materials were printed mainly for those students who do not have access to information technology including television. It was initiated by Ministry of Education in cahoots with Royal Education Council to reach out the unreached. Printing started somewhere towards the end of March. Five volumes of SIM for all key stages were printed phase wise and accordingly distributed amongst the students across the country before the actual lockdown. Resources were designed in a simplistic way for the concerned student to carry out without anyone's guidance. To ensure that every child is taken care, distribution were carried out at the respective school level by the concerned class teachers. Correction of SIMs were also facilitated by calling students to the school in few numbers adhering to the protocol of COVID-19. Most students including their parents showed preference of SIM over other forms of learning because of its user friendly. They could make use of the resources at their own time unlike television that needs to be attended at time of the broadcast.

### **Radio Lessons**

Supplementary backing predominantly for key stage I (Classes PP-III) were delivered by airing lessons through radio. This was mainly for students residing in the remote part of the country. Aired lesson were for the most part effective for audio visual learners. According to Pírez-Femená & Iglesias-García (2019), children with learning difficulties can overcome the challenges of reading, oral expression and their self-esteem through use of radio. Listening comprehension can be greatly enhanced through use of radio. Furthermore, with enhanced

listening skills they become aware about how particular words are being pronounced and thus progresses reading as well.

### **Contact Teaching**

Before the actual lockdown of the country, even though schools were closed, Students were grouped as per the location of their residences. Depending upon the convenience of their location, appropriate spot were chosen for them to get their doubt elucidated by their subject teachers. It was the prospect for teachers to keep track of students' progress and subsequently could provide required support. Outdoor teaching and learning from regular practice gave students an air of relaxation. Practice of contact teaching went on until the actual lockdown.

### **Conclusion**

Online education is one of the sundry progresses that the digital world had made accessible to mankind. It dissuade learners' physical presence in a class. It offers opportunity for a learner to be discipline and accountable for their own learning. Online instruction offers a core development in teaching and learning since it expedites the interchange of information and proficiency while providing prospects for all categories of learners in distant or underprivileged settings. Its popularity has been highly perceived during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the fact that online instruction is gaining status, it is not free from censure. Many do not accede online education for the reason that it actually does not resolves the real challenges of teaching and learning while others are apprehensive about the many hurdles that impede real online teaching and learning. These anxieties embrace the fluctuating nature of technology, the intricacy of networked structures, the lack of steadiness in online learning atmospheres, and the inadequate understanding of the extent to which participants need to know to effectively partake.

The experiences and understanding cited undoubtedly points out the fact for the need to acquaint the education fraternity with different forms of e-learning to ensure that the continuity of the education is not disrupted in unforeseen time like the COVID-19 pandemic. Professional Development on online learning need to be carried out on consistent basis to keep abreast with the latest development. Familiarization enhances the regularity of the participants.

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