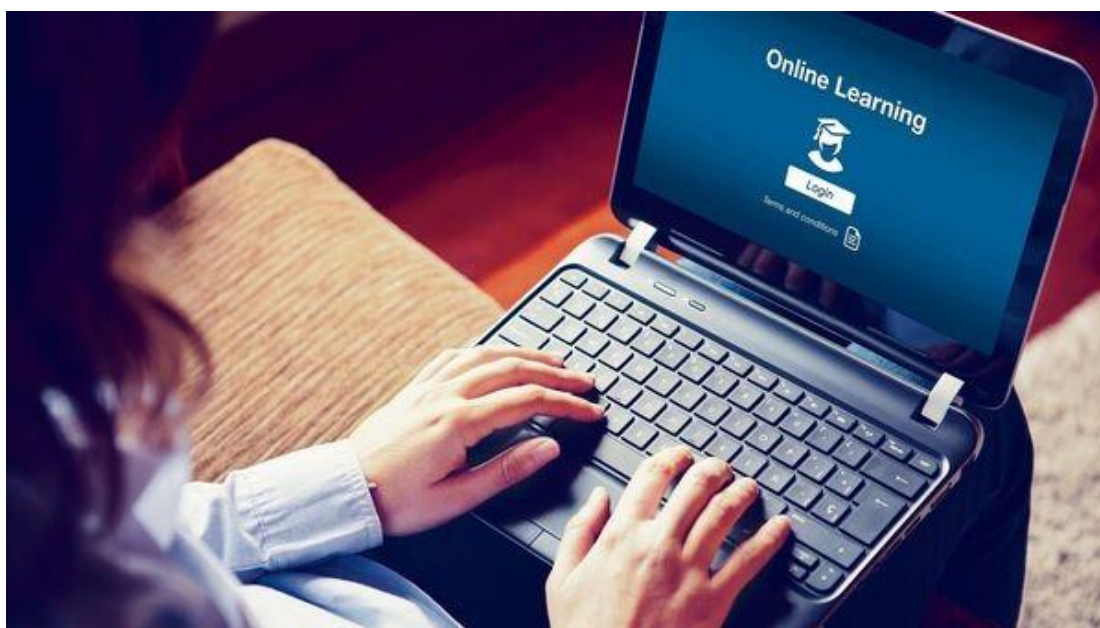


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Online education is inadequate for reasons we have long known

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Its weakness: It addresses neither core educational goals nor the fundamental process of learning



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Why does online education always fall so short of its promise? Partly because our expectations from it are too high. Often these hopes are buoyed by the commercial interests of some, or faith in technology mixed with an inadequate appreciation of social-human matters. But even those whose judgement is unsullied by these forces eventually realize the vast gap between their expectations and reality. This point needs no emphasis, given the tragic failures of online education during the covid pandemic, even earlier. But we must try to understand why it happens.

Why does online education fall short? The answers lie at the very core of what education is and how learning happens.

Education is about developing three kinds of things in the learner. So we have three sorts of educational goals.

Capacities: such as reading, critical thinking, team work, self-discipline.

Values and dispositions: for example, empathy, non-discrimination, respect for others.

Knowledge: of calculus, magnetism, history, etc. These three kinds of goals are often intertwined, and the processes through which their learning happens cannot be neatly separated.

Some of the specific goals are achieved mostly by social interaction and cultural immersion. Most values are learnt this way and also many capacities. Even the biggest champions of online education usually do not claim that it can develop values and fundamental capacities, so this piece focuses on goals that are to do with knowledge and some directly related capacities, such as critical thinking.

Two kinds of knowledge are goals of education: 'know-what' and 'know-how'. Know-what is about content and concept knowledge; for example, what a peninsula is, why the Mughal Empire decayed, how the natural water cycle works. Know-how is about how to do things. Some know-hows are very much also capacities, like reading or critical thinking. But some know-hows are much more specific to their content area (or subject). For example, how do you measure height, how do you design a circuit that works, how do you collect different kinds of leaves and study them to categorize them. The know-what and know-hows are also interlinked.

Good education is often about developing know-how and not only the know-what. The reason is that the amount of content and concepts available as knowledge is immeasurable, so know-whats are infinite; however, know-how gives a student the ability to go on accumulating know-whats. Just for a recap, broad basic capacities like critical thinking and reading are also necessary for the gaining of knowledge.

Now about the process of learning, and this is applicable not just to school students but also to adults. Learning towards specific goals requires a teacher. Why this is so is central to the matter we have taken up.

The content part of know-whats in themselves may not require a teacher if the student is motivated enough to learn. Students can parse the content. However, the concept part of know-what often requires human interaction, because it requires seeing patterns in a range of content and drawing conclusions from that. Most know-hows are very difficult to learn without a teacher and capacities are practically impossible to learn without one. But why is a teacher unable to do all this online effectively?

Learning across any length of time, for example during a school class period, or through the entire year, is determined by a few key things.

Attention and focus: The first is an invaluable mental resource that mediates anything we learn. If we don't pay attention, we will not learn. And in education, it's about sustained attention.

Perseverance: All learners fail to learn and understand, and they must persevere to be successful. If they don't persevere, they will not learn. Again, it's not perseverance only across long periods of time, but also within (for example) a school period or a single assignment.

Emotional state: Being excited, bored, or sad, for example, has a direct effect on learning.

Motivation: The learner's desire to learn enables learning. This desire, however, is itself affected by a complex range of things in the learner's immediate environment and life.

Learning is almost entirely determined by these. To ensure learning, the teacher must orchestrate attention and perseverance; understand and manage emotions and motivation. This cannot be done online.

There is another critical dimension in the process of learning that makes the teacher's physical presence essential along with the role of other fellow learners. Different learners learn different things more effectively by one or more of these methods: by listening, talking, doing, seeing and experiencing. Social interaction enables all this. It's about discussion, questioning, arguing, etc, and all this evolves organically in a group of students with a teacher. This again is nearly impossible online.

Online education cannot address these core requirements of good education—neither core educational goals nor the fundamental process of learning. And that is why it has very limited effectiveness.

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