

# Indian Digital Classrooms and its Ethical Framework

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## Abstract:

The notion of classroom has changed drastically over the course of time and with these changing notions, there has been considerable revisions in the ethical framework governing these crucial notions. Ethical paradigms have been decisive markers in maintaining the scholastic ethos of a classroom and though it had undergone changes in its scope and texture, the basic precepts were held to be largely inviolable. However, the increased dependence on technological tools slowly gave way to new age virtual classrooms that witnessed a momentous shift in the ideologies governing the structure. Tests and assignments became an ethical dilemma as their evaluation and assessment had to be done on a vastly different scale. Earlier guidelines had to be modified and redrafted to assure an ethical transparency in the conduct of the classroom. The present paper attempts to look at how ethical paradigms had been revised and formulated in digital classrooms and how this process lays emphasis on the fluid nature of the notion of a classroom.

**Key words:** Ethical paradigms, teaching-learning process, digital classrooms, changing competencies

## Introduction :

The idea of digital classrooms is touted to be a new one as opposed to the traditional classrooms where there was direct and face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the students. In India, both AIR and Doordarshan had

telecast a number of educational programs organised by UGC, NCERT and IGNOU. These programs were always recorded earlier and therefore, they did not fall under the category of online education. Digital classrooms became more acceptable and feasible when almost all sections of society had access to internet facilities.

Digital classrooms are characterised by a lack of face-to-face interactions and this aspect thoroughly alters the interactions that happen within the classroom. In the Indian scenario, it is the pandemic that popularised digital classrooms as a viable option and this paper will be focusing on the Indian context and its specific issues. The year 2020 became highly crucial in several aspects and our education system too underwent an upheaval in terms of techniques and resources.

## Objectives: (i) Ethical Paradigms and their Changing Nuances :

Ethics is crucial in all aspects of human behaviour and interaction. It can be defined as "a series of right principles defined by a group or community of individuals" (Barnes 112). Classroom ethics become all the more important as these values have to be inculcated in students at a very young age so as to bring about a positive reinforcement in their moral framework. Ethical paradigms of digital classrooms have to evolve constantly so as to adapt according to the changing times and yet retain the scope and vision of a healthy and dynamic community.





The interactions between the teacher and the students form the most pertinent aspect of any classroom. Such interactions were given paramount importance and one can also think about the *gurukulas* of the ancient times where the students lived with their teacher so as to imbibe not just academic ideals, but also valuable life lessons that can be imparted only through prolonged associations. In contrast, digital classrooms give the illusion of a certain invisibility. Therefore, "teachers need to be aware that the Internet introduces new types of behaviours that can affect the classroom. Students don't think their teachers are reading the information or they don't care if they do. Classroom ethics is an issue for research and discussion in the digital age because life is not a game and everything is not entertaining" (Barnes 120-21).

Although many core values of the earlier ethical paradigm are still revered and adhered to, we must also accommodate the key changes that have come into this theoretical framework. Digital accountability is a very important idea and many students seem to think that their perceived 'anonymity' in the digital space as opposed to the 'visibility' in the traditional classrooms gives them the perfect opportunity to behave in questionable ways. "As young people's thinking remains at the self-focused level, education about digital technologies, ethical blind spots, and online participation is needed. Young people's moral sensitivity needs to be developed because of the potential impact of their actions online" (Buchanan 3).

## (ii) Changing Ideas of Competence :

In traditional classrooms, students focused on acquiring linguistic and communicative competence along with problem-solving skills. However, digital classrooms call for a new kind of competence that determines the future of the new-age learner and teacher. Both teachers and students are required to be competent in handling

technology and a lack of such skills translate to their performance in the digital platform. Various surveys have revealed how teachers in India are still reeling under the pressure of adopting digital skills that they require in handling classes successfully. A survey by TeamLease Ed Tech revealed that about 31% of teachers in India are far from being proficient in handling and using digital tools (Dubey 2022). Thus, the gap between the ideal and the real is widening and one has to factor in a number of issues before zeroing in on a solution. Often, the lack of digital competence can also lead to severe ethical dilemmas within the ambit of the classroom.

## Significance of the Study :

The present paper tries to analyse how ethical paradigms need to be re-evaluated in the changing ideal of the classroom. It will look at the challenges faced by the teacher in such a scenario and how it translates to classroom interactions that preserve the sanctity of an ethical framework. The paper will identify key ethical markers that have to be addressed in the digital context and provide a discussion on how these crucial indicators determine the quality of the teaching-learning process.

## Review of Related Literature :

Several researchers have pondered on the ethical dimensions of online education. Bajpai, N.(2022) studied "Ethical Issues of Online Teaching-Learning" to analyse how the teaching-learning process underwent a critical change during the pandemic. Anderson B. and Simpson M. (2007) in their seminal work, *Ethical Issues in Online Educations* look at how distance education require a different set of parameters to assess their efficacy and effectiveness. Buchanan, R. (2019) looks at "Digital Ethical Dilemmas in Teaching" and gives an insightful analysis into the new problems that beset the digital era of education. Ben-Jacob, M.G. and Glazerman, A.H. (2021) in their article, "The





Ethical Implications of the Overuse of Technology in Education" looks at technology and impactful education.

### **Ethical Paradigms: Discussion on Major Dilemmas and Issues :**

There are several ethical dilemmas that plague the digital classroom and it is impossible to analyse all of them in this paper and therefore, this study will focus on certain central ethical concerns that are specific to the Indian context. There are issues that pertain to the efficacy of the teaching-learning process, and then there are concerns that will explore how transparency is often sacrificed at the altar of plagiarism and cheating in online exams. One of the greatest challenges faced by the teacher in the digital classroom is the absolute uncertainty regarding the students' thought processes. In platforms like Google Meet and Zoom, students often switch off their audio and video and the teacher often feels like he/she is addressing no one in particular. Responses are often delayed and sometimes, non-existent. Such an issue never existed in the traditional classroom where discipline and decorum were often taken for granted. Teachers were now saddled with the "psychological stress while speaking to blank screens" (Bhattacharya 286). The temptations are too many and the students are only too willing to indulge in them. Citing this context, Singh aptly points out that, "Immense distracting factors are involved in digital classroom where learners are required to pay undivided attention. This may eventually retard the intellectual development of students at large. Students may be diverted from developing the patience for critical learning" (Singh 2021).

Yet another issue that proves detrimental to the teaching-learning process in digital classrooms is the incompetency in digital teaching. In India, we often stress on certain digital skills that are required for the conduct of

an online class. However, recent studies imply that digital competence is not a one-dimensional concept and should essentially incorporate a holistic approach. Garry Falloon points out that there are many important indices that govern the idea of digital competence in the context of a teacher. These indices include "legal and ethical considerations, personal and societal impacts and effects, and dispositional elements such as maintaining a balanced and objective attitude towards technology innovation, and a willingness to explore the potential of emerging technologies for personal and professional benefit." Chiu et al. identifies the important thrust areas in the current scenario, "the pandemic reveals the urgent need to augment the educational system's technological infrastructure, expand the teachers' pedagogical expertise and the students' learning repertoire" (2021).

While many issues have been taken up for redressal, the teacher's inability to cope with the stress of managing the digital classroom hasn't been properly addressed. Teachers often underwent severe stress on account of the sudden shift in paradigms and the resultant 'burn-out' severely affected their personal and professional output. Dehghan points out that, "While teachers' technostress has been a matter of concern and investigation during the pre-pandemic era, it has inevitably and definitely been intensified during Covid-19 pandemic period as a result of the sudden and unexpected demands imposed on them for using fully online classes (9)." In order to improve the texture of the digital classroom, it is therefore, highly imperative to look into solutions that can rectify this situation.

Another serious ethical concern in digital classroom is the issue of online assessments. Assessments are essentially carried out to test the student's aptitude and one has to be honest if the result has to be correct. Online classes unleashed a new wave of cheating as students were almost sure that they wouldn't be caught



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or held culpable. "One of the reasons with such large-scale malpractices that was observed in almost all the higher educational institute faculty and students was the lack of collaborative learning environment, direct interaction with faculty members, and peer learning opportunities that were missing in the online mode" (Bhattacharya 289). They were not dealing with the strict surveillance of teachers in exam halls and found it easier to come up with a number of gimmicks that made cheating the norm rather than the aberration.

Perhaps the most detrimental ethical issue in digital classrooms is plagiarism and online assignments remain a testimony to how students feel no moral compunction in passing off another's work as their own. It has been cited as one of the most common ethical concerns in digital classrooms. "Taking credit for someone else's work is the most prevalent type of academic dishonesty. In addition, the learners' lack of preparation and interest in the learning module can be linked to academic dishonesty" (Johnson, 2022).

#### Conclusion :

The new era in education has literally opened a Pandora's box as the issues are many and the solutions are few. While one can go on endlessly about the various dilemmas, the focus should be on finding pragmatic solutions to counter these. There is no consensus among the best practices that have to be adopted but many believe that the solution lies in an "effective use of information and communication technology in combining classroom learning with asynchronous and synchronous mode of learning should be debated among experienced educators and learners" (Bhattacharya 291). The entire academic community is becoming aware of the ethical issues that need our urgent attention. Awareness is the first step and after that, we need to look at practical measures that can look at feasible options to address these dilemmas. We

need to come to the understanding that the future of our educational system is significantly dependent on the way we handle these issues. The need of the hour is a dialogue that will encompass teachers and students to come together and look at viable solutions rather than idealistic notions.

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