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VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: READING LITERATURE IN A LIBERATED SPACE

R. P. Singh

This article argues that the students' will and competency to critically discuss and understand literature can be exercised more freely, and so more powerfully, in a virtual than in a physical classroom. There are two psychologically boosting reasons for this to happen. First, the online classroom psychologically 'invites' all students to participate in the interactive discussions; and secondly, the participating students can confidently express personal experiences, even controversial views. Engaging with literary texts, armed with critical literacy, one can see a richly fruitful critical reception in the liberated virtual space (classroom).

When the University Grants Commission (UGC) of India, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, issued a circular encouraging the Indian higher education institutions to adopt the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which would be valid 'for credit mobility as per the UGC (Credit Framework for Online Learning Courses through SWAYAM) Regulations 2016' (quoted from the commission's letter, 19 May, 2020 addressed to all the VCs of Indian universities), the already murmuring debate about online delivery of education intensified around mainly three concerns related with what may or may not happen in our COVID-cracked educational future. These three inescapable concerns can be expressed through the questions: Is the online mode an efficacious mode? Will it be inclusive enough? What will happen to the idea of the value and meaning of education when it will be delivered through virtual classrooms? It can be said that the third concern-question is the end which the other two ones help us reach at. In other words, the aim of education is to 'create' enlightened and free citizens through maximally effective means with-out any exclusionary barriers and their avoidable fallouts.

This article, written with an apprehension that the disruption and rupture caused by COVID-19 will make virtual classrooms a quasi-permanent feature of the transaction of education in days and years to come, will try to argue that such classrooms, subject to their being made optimally fit and fine in terms of infrastructural efficiency with socially just and equitable dimensions, can be vehicles of inculcating and strengthening the value of reading and understanding literature with what is called critical literacy after Paulo Freire's eponymously titled book of 1970. This value of education has got an added relevance in the media-laden socio-cultural and political environment in which

we live today. Candidly speaking, this argument was initially noded out as a small and thin experiential green leaf in the course of this writer's virtual engagement of the Post Graduate students of English Literature in an English-linguistically *mofussil* setting where most of the students take up this subject on the basis of their perceived strength in the language gained through the traditional grammar-translation method of picking up this foreign language of aspiration. Some of them are really good, of course with contextual limitations, as evidenced through their evaluations by teachers. During the online classroom interactions it was found that some among these good students who remained attentive but silent in the physical classrooms were intelligently-interactively vocal in the virtual ones. They felt liberated to express their views and assessments regarding the literary and socio-cultural topics under discussions. Their shyness and inhibitions did not hamper their cognitive-appreciative vocality, though sometimes their responses were limited and superficial. But, in sum total, it was beautiful to experience such a widening of freedom achieved through virtual academic interactions intermittently marred by internet connectivity problems. It would have been better and more beautiful without such marrings.

The barriers on the path to the liberated space

It means that this liberal value-potential of the online mode of teaching and learning for students of literature and humanities can be sufficiently realized only when the means-part of the issue is resolved satisfactorily, which is not very easy in the face of the hard truths of Indian inequality expressed through the now-hackneyed phrase, 'digital divide'. In order to get a keen understanding of the present status of this divide in the Indian society, two academicians working in two different areas of knowledge and pedagogy (a research scholar in the department of History of Madras Christian College, Chennai, and a Visiting Professor, department of Chemistry, IIT-Delhi) came together, in May 2020, to conduct a survey among teachers and students across India with a view to know about their experiences of education during the radically changed time of COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers and students concerned were especially asked to share their views regarding the future of transferring and gaining knowledge keeping their institutions and subjects in mind.

As a result of the survey, the barriers to liberation-through-virtual classrooms came out, the most disturbingly insurmountable of them being that 'more than half (students) *in any class in any institution* are simply not able to attend (online) lectures in real time for want of the required combination of hardware and electrical connectivity in their homes' (Babu and Ramaswami 6, the emphasis through italics added to highlight the grimness of the situation). This inability was found, unsurprisingly, to be acuter and more pronounced in villages, small towns, and in families with lower levels of income. The survey revealed that for most teachers, the shift to the online mode of knowledge

delivery was not a planned application of the technology to enhance the teaching-learning experience, but an unplanned response to a crisis that had vastly disrupted the traditional classroom system of imparting knowledge to the students.

Reading with critical literacy

Critical literacy is another name for political consciousness about the social world in which one lives, and to read a literary text with this literacy is to read it politically. Thus, reading literature for social justice calls for adopting a critical socio-political perspective — to unravel the underlying meanings that reek of social injustice and inequality, for questioning unfair ideologies and honestly advocating the deconstruction of oppressive pedagogies. Allan Luke defines it as “an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological, and socio-linguistic content of the curriculum,” focusing “on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities, and involving ‘both redistributive and recognitive social justice’ (Luke 5).

What is expected to happen in ideally interactive literature classrooms is a four-dimensional discussion on the particular text, which can critically play out as: disruption of its received commonplace understanding, interrogation of multiple viewpoints, examination of the socio-political issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. These four dimensions are inherently interrelated. The confidence-giving liberated space of the online classes have the potential to ignite the students' desire to travel the short distance between 'reading the word' and 'reading the world'. On suitable spurs from the teacher, they can 'politically' raise in their minds critical departure-point questions on what is truth, how, by whom, and in whose interest it is presented and represented. Academically sitting, thinking and speaking in their homes and being 'monitored' by their near and dear ones, they can find elation in unpacking the social identities and norms which are subtly promoted or denigrated or treated with condescension between the lines in literary texts, in assessing the characters and events from more than one viewpoint and perspective, in analyzing the politico-cultural and historical contexts of the texts, and in subjecting to interrogation the issues of prejudice, power, hegemony and agency propounded by the writers. It must be accepted that each critical task may not be performed perfectly by the students. They may be sometimes limited, superficial and overenthusiastic, but under the guidance of professionally motivated teachers they can rise above these limitations. They can be instructed to ground their responses in readings of standard critical texts, and trained through online workshops on how to read literature with critical literacy. To give two illustrative and multipliable examples, they can be told to write essays, in an asynchronous mode, on why Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is not accepted as a work of Dalit literature by the Dalit critics, and on how Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* tries

to tackle the problem of latent Islamophobia hidden comfortably in apparently secular minds. Such efforts can go a long way in ensuring the efficacy of the virtual classrooms which are to be the new normal in our educational future.

As of now, in the Indian scholarly critical corpus there is not much literature devoted to the examination of the different aspects of online teaching of literature on an empirical basis. As the new normal becomes a way of life over the coming years, such works will come to be written by the Indian teacher-critics detailing the particularities of the Indian experiences in this novel area of discussing literary texts in a virtual setting with critical literacy. But, as discussed above, the potential as well as the challenges are unmissable. Experiments elsewhere have seen successes. We know that for the Western society the shift to the virtual teaching-learning mode was not sudden, crisis-driven and compelled. It was there like the application of a good additional tool to enrich the process and impact of educating the minds. In the racially prejudiced American academic environment online teaching of literary texts with an emphasis on discussing them with critical literacy found encouraging results mixed, naturally, with some risks and challenges. Commentators like D. H. Beeghly (*It's about time: using electronic literature discussion groups with adult learners*, 2005), J. Bowers-Campbell (*Take it out of class: exploring virtual literature circles*, 2011), and G. Coffey (*Literacy and technology: integrating technology with small group, peer-led discussions of literature*, 2012) laid the social value of teaching literature online with critical tools ready in the mental armoury of the politically conscious reader. They, in their own ways, underline the salutary democratic situation of the virtual classroom where every student gets her chance to actively participate, particularly those who feel shy or inhibited in face-to-face in-person classes.

By way of exploring the challenges, Beverly Logas Koopman and Kathleen Riley have written very perceptive essays – *From Socrates to wikis: Using online forums to deepen discussions* (2010) and *Enacting critical literacy in English classrooms: How a teacher learning community supported critical enquiry* (2015), respectively. Riley's essay is focused on the efficacy of pooling of critical literacy skills of different teachers through academic net-working among members of a teachers collective called The Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group. Arguing with experimental data about the pedagogical effectiveness of wikis (online message/discussion boards) in his essay, B. L. Koopman convincingly proves that the freedom of the virtual academic environment goes a very long way in taking the learners towards raising deeper questions which result from their deep curiosities about the topics they have been given to grasp critically. He concludes his essay on an interestingly serious note with a reference to Socrates. He writes, "From Socrates to wikis, the ancient art of conversation, together with powerful questions, is still the vehicle through which thinking is distilled and complex ideas are embraced. Socrates comes of age in yet another century" (Koopman 27).

Conclusion

In the ongoing debate around the impact of online teaching on the future of education we hear some notes of despair, as some commentators have judged it to be heavily top-down in its academic-communicative directionality. They despair that an e-classroom transfers the information and knowledge contained in books but without any subtlety that should be an inherent part of the intellectual-cognitive acts of explanation and understanding. It is alleged that here imparting of knowledge takes place but without an adequate stimulation to deeper thinking. In view of the above-discussed potentialities, it can be said that such fear and despair are misplaced, at least, as far as discussing literature with critical literacy is concerned. The shift online here can be employed as an opportunity to re-imagine the Indian higher education scene which has long been largely elitist and exclusionary owing to the various factors related with the economic and societal structures of the country. What is more that must not continue, is, that our system of education has been more about acquiring degrees and less about developing the questioning-critical faculties. This system can be dented effectively by liberally and intelligently investing in the online mode of educating our young minds.

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