The baby was crying. The lunch was on the stove. Bills were piling up. Limari Colon was struggling to manage her household as a single mother in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Thinking about various options, she finally started working from home as a social media manager. But she needed more skills and turned to an online course platform, took several courses, and ended up with a course on content strategy from an established university. Soon, she evolved from her small income to a bigger advertising job, a great job title, and exposure to big brands and a fabulous life. Eventually, she gave up that too to become a freelancer. Now, she has all the time and money to look after her son and also to create new music on her guitar.1

This is just one story out of the countless tales of life transformations that are taking place around the world today. Students with minimal or no access to conventional schooling are getting benefited by the ever-growing online platforms or massive open online courses (MOOCs). Premier institutions of learning like Stanford and Harvard universities are offering many courses through such platforms, which have actual course starting and ending dates, assignments, evaluations, and an interactive classroom setup. The key difference lies in the fact that the student has the power to pause and play. These courses are being used to fast-track the regular education given in schools, colleges, and universities; to enhance employment skills; and even to completely replace conventional education. The truly staggering impact of these online courses can probably never be assessed because of their very nature—being on the Internet. Any one of the major organisations providing such online learning has on record millions of students who attended thousands of courses. And the numbers are growing exponentially. The freedom from the closed nature of conventional education is helping and will continue to help many. In this scenario, statistics really don’t matter.

The New Teacher

The face of teaching has changed forever. Diligent students are not content with the black, white, or digital boards in front of them and want more. Every infant of this information age is brought up more on digital feed than on the cereal kind. It is not shocking, therefore, that today’s infants grow up into kids who are at home with boards that talk or that they can talk with. How can teachers cope with these challenges? There are many online teaching platforms that enable teachers to present course material with audio, video, animation and post assignments, multiple-choice questions, polls, surveys, feedbacks—all in an automated setup that takes away the burden of correcting test
papers. These online platforms do it for the teachers! Most online teaching platforms are open-source and free of cost. The only limit to the classroom is the teacher’s imagination. Even in remote hill regions of India, where even phone connectivity is absent, not to speak of the Internet, many teachers make a list of the content they need from the Internet and download it when they are on a visit to nearby towns that have Internet connectivity.

Just putting all available information on the Internet is also an easy way to ensure that students get the material. Many premier universities have long started the practice of videoing all their regular classes and uploading these videos to the Internet. So you can attend a course on advanced calculus at Stanford University just by sitting at home and probably munching your favourite snack! Many organisations have become large enterprises by merely uploading short, witty, and easily understandable videos on school subjects taught worldwide. Enthusiastic students can say goodbye to the tutor and get all guidance and, for all we know, much better teaching, on the Internet. Of course, they would have to miss chatting with friends!

Some organisations have started online global groups of teachers. So a chemistry teacher fumbling with a conversion problem of organic chemistry in a distant village in Himachal Pradesh, India, can contact a peer in New York or Paris for solutions. Since the sun is always up in some part of the globe at any given point in time, this means that teachers can work at their convenience. The interesting part is that they don’t have to go through embarrassing periods of silence or assert false information when confronted with questions from sincere and eager students that they can’t answer. All they have to do is to shed the ego and ask the students to ‘look it up on the Internet’ and come back with answers that can be vetted for authenticity. The teacher also doesn’t have to wait for textbooks or reference books to be updated to bring the latest information into the classroom.

Of course, the new classroom has many challenges, as some researchers have pointed out: ‘When moving towards teaching online, teachers are confronted every day with challenges such as online moderation, establishing social presence online, transitioning learners to online environments and giving feedback online.’\(^2\) One big challenge is that the classroom becomes invisible, and it becomes really difficult to gauge the mind of students. However, many learning management systems (LMS) have developed intricate webs of artificial intelligence algorithms that help to track the learning curve and the psychological response of students. Motivating students can be challenging. One online educator says: ‘Motivating students online is a high-stakes endeavour. A lot can go wrong, and you can’t fall back on your engaging classroom persona to pull students back in once they go astray.’\(^3\)

**The New Student**

The digital student is a liberated learner. Freed from the clutches of endless queues for admission, the never-ending length of courses, laborious note-taking, and the distance from one’s online avatar, the digital learner has an option to pursue as many courses as possible during the entire cycle from admission to examinations, and also the awarding of a degree, completed literally in clicks. More good news is that the virtual learning space has not swallowed the camaraderie associated with schools and colleges. Students have the luxury of discussing difficult topics at any time, day or night, with any other student.
from any part of the world. They can also have traditional physical study groups that meet regularly.

When present-day students miss a class, they can just ask classmates to instant-message their notes. Numerous competitive exams are now being taken by young students who prepare with guidebooks or notes shared by Good Samaritans on the Internet. Internet-connected eyeglasses enable students to look at an object and receive a plethora of information about it just next to the eyelid. Such eyeglasses not only provide the information, but also give the students the experience of being present in a particular location, albeit not in real-time. Social networking websites have doubled as platforms for sharing problems and solutions on different coursework. The market is full of smart wearables like wristwatches that can give all information ranging from one’s personal data to what is happening right now at the other end of the world. These wearables have now evolved into tattoos that glow and act as doors to mines of information.

As some pioneers of technology opine, the learning curve of present-day or future learners will be very different: ‘The most important pillar behind innovation and opportunity—education—will see tremendous positive change in the coming decades as rising connectivity reshapes traditional routines and offers new paths for learning. Most students will be highly technologically literate, as schools continue to integrate technology into lesson plans and, in some cases, replace traditional lessons with more interactive workshops. Education will be a more flexible experience, adapting itself to children’s learning styles and pace instead of the other way around. Kids will still go to physical schools, to socialize and be guided by teachers, but as much, if not more, learning will take place employing carefully designed educational tools.’

The biggest saving grace of the modern learning scene is that students can almost instantaneously figure out errors in the content being taught by accessing the many resources available on the Internet. Many online learning platforms have successfully initiated peer evaluations among students. Virtual-learning assistants have even been able to provide an ‘out-of-hours version of the support provided by university employability service staff.’

New Avenues for Outreach

As it is very easy to learn and teach in the digital world, it is also easier to help. Thousands of busy professionals around the globe are increasingly volunteering to teach and provide their fellow human beings with life-changing skills. This has become possible because they can connect over the Internet—or, better still, create content and post it on the Web for others to access at their leisure. The Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University runs an information and communications technology (ICT)-based service of educational outreach, Vivekadisha, where teachers from around the globe come together with interactive and innovative material and coordinate with monks to deliver quality education to urban and rural areas of fifteen districts of two Indian states, the U.S.A., the U.A.E., and Germany, covering twenty schools, two colleges, and more than 10,200 students. There are several such organizations, and still more people, who share their knowledge with many students, mostly underprivileged.

Will the Academy Die?

Does this all mean that our good old schools, colleges, and universities have no
value anymore? Not at all. However, the way the classroom is perceived, both by students and teachers, would undergo a major paradigm shift, as it has already done in many places. The focus would be on enabling students to make the best use of technology to concentrate on the essentials and achieve excellence in a particular discipline of study. It would also free up considerable time for both students and teachers to engage in meaningful interactive critical thinking that would eventually further the cause of that particular discipline. One need not be afraid of online learning as something that can get out of control. The entire scenario would evolve, according to one researcher: ‘as MOOCs become increasingly common and online students become more knowledgeable about the potential of online learning, their tastes will become increasingly sophisticated, and they may choose between MOOCs based partly upon the design of the MOOC.’

However, all is not rosy in the digital learning world. When education is governed by technology, it also gets concentrated in the hands of the powerful few, who can then direct it to their vested interests. Information about a particular faith tradition can be decimated, access to some websites blocked, ‘unfavourable’ posts brought down, and Internet usage patterns altered. Already, search engines have started tinkering with search results for the same keywords for different people. E-book publishers show the lines in texts marked by earlier readers, thereby psychologically influencing later readers to mark those very lines. These can be major deterrents in the free environment of digital education. But, with that word of caution, in digital learning the mind determines everything, echoing the Upanishadic statement: ‘The mind alone is the cause of bondage and liberation of the human being.’ What one can do and not do with digital learning tools is restricted only by one’s mental abilities. Recent research has shown that a balance between the conventional and digital classrooms can lead to a ‘very positive’ result. Both teachers and course coordinators evince keen interest in a method called SCAI, which ‘represents a combination of the initials of the poles defined for each of the three dimensions considered, namely Social, Conceptual, Authentic, Individual, Instrumental and Integrated.’

We have to further explore how best to use the technology we have, and further develop it to both enhance and preserve the free flow of education.

We have to remember Swami Vivekananda’s emphasis on education as the solution to all social evils. Let us use all the resources at our command, technological and otherwise, to get rid of all social evils.

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My Children are having their Exams

The gracious Divine Mother Karpagambal’s sanctum sanctorum. The Devi was resplendent. There were no other devotees present there. Yet, Sudhira hesitated to approach the priest.

‘Why are you standing there? Please come. Do you want to do archana? Tell me the names’, said the priest.

‘Will the priest accept my request? Will he perform the worship whole-heartedly?’ wondered Sudhira.

‘Amma, tell me the names.’

‘Swami, I have a request,’ said Sudhira softly.

‘A request with me? It is the Divine Mother who grants everything…..’

‘Swami, please listen to my request and perform the archana to the Divine Mother.’

The priest gently enquired, ‘Any problem at home?’

‘No Swami. Please pray to the Mother that the children who will write the +2 exam today should perform well in their exams.’

‘All right. Tell me the names of your children.’

‘Swami, let me tell you the purpose of this archana,’ Sudhira insisted.

‘What else? To score high marks, isn’t it?’ asked the priest.

‘It’s not just that. My children will write the exams today. First of all, they should be physically fit while giving the exam.’ ‘…………’

‘Secondly, they should not get nervous thinking that they will not do well in the exam.’

The priest gave her a puzzled look.

‘Only two more points Swami. My children should remember everything that they have read. And completing the exam in time, they should come out happily with a feeling of fulfilment.’

The priest exclaimed, ‘Great! I have seen mothers who just want their children to score high marks; but you are different.’ He noticed that Sudhira wore a pendant with a photo of Sri Sarada Devi.

Skipping the usual preliminary mantras, like, ‘saha kutumbanam…..’, he said, ‘Divine Mother will definitely grant your wishes. All right, now tell me the names of your two children.’

Praying to Divine Mother, Sudhira replied, ‘Not two children Swami,…..’ and drew out a sheet with a list of names. The priest started to read it.

‘Abhijit, Amala, Mohana, Ranjan…..’, it started off with, and ended with ‘Syed, Stephen.’

The amazed priest exclaimed, ‘What is this? Who are all these children?’

‘They are all my children.’

‘Even the last two?’

‘Yes Swami, these 52 children in my class should study well, become noble and accomplished, and bring a good name to our society,’ said the government school teacher, Sudhira.

—Swami Vimurtananda