'Covid batch': A case study on unethical assessment practices in selected higher educational institutions in Assam and West Bengal, India

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Abstract

The evolution of Covid-19 in India has generated biomedical crises and various crises in teaching and learning processes. The lack of consistency in taking classes, the unsystematic methods of assessing the students, the mockery of the students as 'Covid batch', and the career insecurities of the students have transformed the knowledge scape of the students. During the virtual interaction sessions with the participants, the authors felt that the students' approach towards virtual learning had been infected with insecurities, insincerities, and the fear of bleak futures. These challenges invite us to critically re-investigate and re-address the unethical evaluation practices within a broader framework of the factors that contribute to the unequal systems of knowledge production within the higher educational institutions in India. Based on these arguments, the article discusses the various factors that provoke the students to indulge in such unethical practices during Covid-19; the consequences they encounter; and the possible methods to overcome such challenges. The discussions in this article are based on a case study conducted with six postgraduate students from different higher educational institutions in West Bengal and Assam.

Keywords: Assam; assessment; Covid-19; ethics; India; knowledge scape; open-book examinations; West Bengal.

Introduction and background

The thematic arguments in this article have emerged from the teaching and learning experiences of the authors. While interacting with their respective students, the authors realised that they are suffering from various psychological crises. The authors also learned how the educational institutions are systematically contributing to the sufferings. During the interactions, the students shared how the academically regressive approach of the educational institutions makes the students feel unmotivated and insecure. This experience provoked the authors to conduct further research on this issue, which shaped this brief article.

The eruption of the pandemic of Covid-19 in India has led to the closure of physical modes of learning, the introduction of online teaching, and the organisation of online examinations. Such transformations have generated new forms of social, economic, and infrastructural challenges on the one hand and have aggravated the already existing pedagogical and curricular difficulties on the other. This article discusses unethical assessment practices that several higher educational institutions have adopted in Assam (a state located in Northeastern India) and West Bengal (a state located in Eastern India) in India and how the unethical practices have academically victimised the students in the process.

The higher educational institutions in India have converted the written examinations that used to take place physically within the classrooms into online open-book examinations (OBEs). This shift from physical spaces into virtual spaces has led to problems like lack of student monitoring, lack of enthusiasm amongst the students, lack of socio-cultural acceptance, and many more. For instance, in several higher educational institutions in India, the students have been awarded degrees without online examinations having been ethically conducted. While conducting a case study with students from selected higher educational institutions in Assam and West Bengal, it came to light that many institutions are conducting online examinations in an open book pattern. But in the name of the open-book pattern, the students are given a fixed set of questions, which the teachers usually discuss in the classrooms. Then the students are encouraged to respond to them by referring to books and research articles. Many participants have expressed a lack of enthusiasm for online examinations because they are socio-culturally disgraced and segregated as the 'Covid batch'. Their intellectual capability and the relevance of their academic degrees are questioned. Before critically engaging with these issues and sharing the participants' perspectives, the authors would like to clarify that this article does not intend to argue that OBEs are ineffective assessment methodologies but makes an effort to unpack how the very

meaning, purpose, and the procedures of the OBEs have been distorted in the higher education institutions in India. Doubtlessly, OBEs uphold a student-centered approach to learning (Scouller & Prosser, 1994; Scouller, 1998; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004) by allowing the students to create a diverse and inclusive learning environment and enabling the students to respond to the questions creatively and critically (Brightwell et al., 2004). During the preparation, the students get the scope of consulting various sources like "textbooks, classroom notes, [and] online blogs" (Ashri & Sahoo, 2021, p. 75) and, therefore, can avoid 'rote learning' (Theophilides & Dionysiou, 1996; Theophilides & Koutselini, 2000). But, due to the sudden shift from physical examinations into online examinations during Covid-19, many students and teachers have failed to adapt to the new system. They did not receive any training regarding the online evaluation procedures. Also, the transition was so unexpected and rapid that a majority of the higher education institutions in the country were not prepared to accommodate this new system of teaching, learning and assessing, and train their students, faculties, and administrators.

Moreover, the rush to meet the academic responsibilities like completing syllabuses, evaluating assignments, conducting examinations and publishing results on time has been another primary concern. To cope with infrastructural crises and the rush of fulfilling academic deadlines, the students and the teachers have resorted to various unethical practices and academic dishonesty (Moralista & Oducado, 2020), like sharing question papers with the students before the examinations, informing the students about referring to particular textbooks, encouraging the students to discuss questions and answers with each other online, etc. Despite the effectiveness of OBEs, the practice of academic dishonesty in online modes of teaching, learning, and assessing is not new and has been in place even before the global evolution of Covid-19, due to varied forms of structural, infrastructural, technological, economic, geographical, topographical, and technical challenges (Ioannidou, 1997; Broyles et al., 2005; Eilertsen & Valdermo, 2000; Heijne-Penninga, 2010). During the pandemic, academic dishonesty has aggravated further, and such malpractices have drained the evaluability of the OBEs in many higher educational institutions in India. It is drastically impacting the students' approach towards seeking degrees and building careers, as discussed in the following sections of this article.

Literature review

The arguments in this article are centrally based on a case study that the authors conducted, and the conclusions have been drawn based on the reflections made by the participants. To diversify the arguments, the authors have analysed the phenomenon of the 'Covid batch' within the perspective of the inequalities of the education system in India. With reference to the inequalities in the education system, some of the articles that have been consulted are those by Jha and Kishore (2020), Mody (2020), Bhatia (2021), and Nawani (2020). These articles discuss the different factors that trigger inequalities in the education system. The authors have also consulted articles by Scouller and Prosser (1994), Scouller (1998), Gibbs and Simpson (2004),

Brightwell et al. (2004), Ashri and Sahoo (2021), Theophilides and Dionysiou (1996), Theophilides and Koutselini (2000), Moralista and Oducado (2020), Ioannidou (1997), Broyles et al. (2005), Eilertsen and Valdermo (2000), and Heijne-Penninga (2010) to justify why the practice of OBEs in the higher education institutions in India during Covid-19 has been criticised in this article.

Research methods

To conduct this research, the authors have used participant interviews and snowball sampling. The participants for the case study were invited in two ways – directly by the authors and through the participants. As the authors academically belong to the field of literary studies, their case studies exclusively focus on postgraduate students (both first and second year) from the discipline of English literature. Also, the authors have invited solely postgraduate students as participants because, usually in India, after completing the postgraduate course in English literature, the students aim for different academic and research positions in various institutions in the country. As a result, they remain cautious about their technical understanding, theoretical learning, and their grades. So the sense of frustration, insecurity, and normalisation of unethical practices that the assessment system in higher educational institutions of India has generated during Covid-19 will be reflected in-depth and genuinely in the reflections of the postgraduate participants. The gender and age group of the participants have not been taken into consideration because the authors felt that these are not relevant criteria for the case study in focus.

The authors' implementation of snowball sampling was a deliberate step. Besides inviting the participants directly, the authors also requested the participants to invite their colleagues into the case study. In this way, the participants did not feel like mere sources of data collection but could actively and collectively participate in this study as co-researchers. The question that was asked to the participants is: to what extent is the open-book assessment in the higher educational institutions ethical in nature? The question allowed the participants to express their agreements and disagreements without any prejudices.

'Covid batch': Stories of insecurities, insincerities and bleak futures

There were six participants – three from universities in West Bengal and three from universities in Assam. Based on the participants' responses to the question mentioned above, the reactions have been classified into the following themes:

a. *Lack of awareness*: With respect to the ethicality of the open-book exam system, it was found that two participants did not know how the open-book system examinations should be conducted. They believed that the open-book assessment system means that the tutors will provide questions beforehand, and the books from which they can find the answers will also be recommended. The participants felt that their only responsibility is to find out the responses from the recommended books and paraphrase them. A final year postgraduate student from the University of Calcutta in West Bengal confidently justifies:

> "I think there is nothing unethical about how the university conducts the open-book examinations. Before the examination, our professors thoroughly oriented us about the open-book exam pattern we have been taught. We are acting as per the guidelines that our faculties have provided."

A first-year postgraduate student from Gauhati University in Assam echoed the same and proceded with a deeper justification in the following way: "What is unethical about open-book assessments? Open-book means to consult a book and write [answer] the questions. And in an era of irregular and online modes of education, what can be expected more from us?"

b. *Lack of motivation*: Besides lack of functional awareness of the open-book assessments, there is also a lack of motivation among the students with respect to the online modes of teaching, learning, and assessing. Two students feel that in whatever ways students are assessed online, transparency can never be gained. Moreover, they are consistently segregated and demoralised as the 'Covid batch' of students in society, and therefore they believe that irrespective of their grades, their hard work will remain unacknowledged. As a first-year postgraduate student from Tezpur University in Assam observes:

> "Truth be told, the online examination is a hoax in the name of the examination. The whole process of this online assessment method seems like imparting informal education, which provokes me to think where lies the difference between formal and informal education? Also, being a student, whatever marks we are securing, our hard work will never be socio-culturally recognised. We also don't know if at job interviews our marks will be given any importance. Therefore, online patterns of examination have no value at all."

A final year postgraduate student from the University of Burdwan in West Bengal says:

> "Online exams are a complete mockery of learning. Without library work, without physical interaction of any literary engagement, and no commitment to the exam preparation, the complete state of learning is lying in wretchedness. So, I am quite doubtful if our online assessments will ever be recognised in any research... institutions in the future."

c. *Lack of realisation:* During the conversation, two students displayed a complete lack of realisation about the unethical ways exams are conducted. A final year student from West Bengal State University confidently defended his unethical practices of writing online exams and said:

> "What is wrong in looking into the books and internet while writing examinations online? Didn't this happen even when we appeared for the exams in the physical model? More or less, everybody does so. All of a sudden, why is there so much fuss around cheating in the exams now? I believe that exams are nothing more than institutional formalities, and what matters is our knowledge. If we have that, then the ethicality and unethicality of assessment patterns do not matter".

The other final year student from Gauhati University in Assam light-heartedly shared that

> "it was fun to give the examinations online because I did not have to go through the pain of studying. When classes were offline, I still was interested in attending them, but now I lost all urge to study with online classes. Even before appearing for the exams, I know that I would answer all the questions. This scenario has released the tension of examination from me."

Analysis and discussion

The reflections by the student participants reveal that the issues of lack of motivation, lack of realisation, and the lack of awareness are not momentary and exclusive to the present Covid-19 period. But it has been firmly embedded within the infrastructural frameworks of the higher education system in India over several decades. Even before the pandemic, the Indian education system suffered from these infrastructural and technical deficiencies. These deficiencies invite us to position this discourse within the framework of epistemological and ontological practices of inequalities in the Indian education system (Mody, 2020; Kishore and Jha, 2020; Nawani, 2020; Bhatia, 2021). The inequalities are driven by various cultural, technical, and infrastructural crises like poor pedagogical practices, poor student assessment patterns, irregularity in conducting classes, lack of functional transparency, etc., which many educational institutions in

India have not addressed. This is why, today, the patchwork alternatives of teaching and learning in India are failing to tackle these sudden academic crises and continue to authenticate and normalise the unethical and regressive practices of knowledge production.

Recommendations

Multiple forms of institutional policies have been written and re-written to date to address the various forms of infrastructural and pedagogical challenges in the higher educational institutions in India. Still, not much development has happened so far. Some of the possible ways in which the issues mentioned above can be addressed are:

a. *Flexible and long-term infrastructural solutions*: it is necessary to generate flexible and long-term infrastructural solutions through developing effective policies of blended teaching and learning so that the existing challenges of the digital divide, economic divide, geographical divide, and socio-cultural divide that have been impacting the processes of teaching and learning during the pandemic can be reduced as much as possible.

b. *Bridging the functional gap*: it is essential to bridge the gap between transformative policies and their applications through identifying the challenges within specific social, cultural, political, economic, and geographical contexts and building the policies accordingly.

c. *Student-centric pedagogies*: The teacher-centric pedagogical patterns need to be shifted into student-centric ones by allowing the students to collaborate with their teachers as co-tutors and co-researchers within the classrooms and beyond.

d. *Peer learning and self-learning*: Peer learning and self-learning should be encouraged amongst the students by inviting them to learn from the natural environment and connect their context-based practical experiences with the text-based theoretical knowledges.

e. *Creative assessment techniques*: Creative assessment techniques should be promoted in the forms of paintings, sculptures, musical performances, short theatrical enactments, photo essays, scrapbooks, etc., so that the students do not feel academically burdened and can unpack their knowledge in their self-designed ways.

These possibilities need to be urgently realised and implemented by the higher educational institutions in India, and several other possibilities also need to be explored. It is high time for the education system in India to navigate ways through which long-term solutions can be put into practice and the current academic crises can be tackled effectively.

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