Chapter 10
Countering Educational Disruptions Through an Inclusive Approach:
Bridging the Digital Divide in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created havoc across the globe, irrespective of governments, industries, and societies. The education sector is one of the most extensively affected by the global health crisis, manifesting expansive negative consequences to learners from various age groups and socioeconomic statuses. Despite the predicaments posed by the pandemic, academic institutions continue to provide education through a distance learning approach. However, the educational disruptions have underscored the lack of digital resources and competencies, excluding poor and unconnected students. Likewise, transitioning to remote education exposed the digital divide and inequalities that have been neglected for a long time. If the ultimate objective is to provide distance education, it is vital to devise solutions to problems faced by underprivileged students. This chapter investigates these challenges that impede the successful adoption of distance education and offers strategies to counter the disruptions as it seems apparent that online education is here to stay.

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INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been ravaging the world for over two years now. Initially identified in the Wuhan Province of China with the first occurrence disclosed in Hubei, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The virus, which quickly made inroads into all facets of life, threw up challenges hitherto unknown and people worldwide have been expressing their sentiments and emotions on various digital platforms (e.g., Garcia, 2020). Every sector, one after another, was severely affected and led to the crippling of economies (Shang et al., 2021). The education sector is one area that was extensively affected. Faced with the pandemic, governments had only two options: (1) completely close schools or (2) shift to online instruction (Iyer et al., 2022; Khusanov et al., 2022). Conscious of the ramifications of the pestilence on health, various countries resorted to what they considered the better option - to cancel all face-to-face classes and opt for the online mode of instruction to protect teachers, staff, and students from this unprecedented public health emergency and to prevent the spread of the virus (Ali, 2020).

Most educational institutions worldwide have shifted to online education, which refers to the instruction delivered via the internet. This mode of learning allows students to access learning materials from anywhere, including in the comfort of their homes. Before the pandemic, online degrees and courses had become immensely popular as an alternative to numerous physically delivered courses (Palvia et al., 2018). These courses are generally offered from the host institution's online learning platform. The main reasons for the popularity of online courses are the flexibility in terms of time, space, and the way learning takes place. Online education programs in the distance mode are offered through various means, including (a) *fully online degrees*, (b) *hybrid education* (i.e., the combination of online and on-campus courses), and (c) *massive open online courses* (MOOCs) generally delivered in a lecture form. Over the years, online education has spread to encompass almost all fields and disciplines. Ruipérez-Valiente (2022) conducted an extensive study on the application of MOOCs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite online education not being a completely unknown concept, its implementation was more concentrated in academic institutions with better technological resources (Ansu-Kyeremeh & Goosen, 2022). The disruption in education had a disastrous impact on social and economic spheres. Disruptions in the teaching and learning equilibrium are a matter of greater concern during the pandemic and pedagogic changes were mandated to establish an effective classroom experience (Wilson, 2020). Although it is the most viable thing to do, the challenges caused by this disruption weighed heavily upon families globally. Not only did it impact the parents' productivity but also the children's social life and learning. In order to tide through the looming crisis, it was recommended that education be imparted through the distance mode. That is when technology came to the rescue. Beginning with the zoom platform for meetings, academics soon turned to the virtual space for classes. Google meet, Microsoft teams, Cisco WebEx, and other such platforms came as a boon to teaching online (Al-Maroof et al., 2021).

Treading the digital space for engaging classes for the first time, teachers took to it quite nervously, almost floundering at times, trying to grapple with this new model. The early days saw teachers trying to address the virtual platform in real-time classes or through PowerPoint presentations. There were broad attitudinal changes towards the role and contribution of these learning technologies by the higher education staff, yet many institutions were neither grasping nor pursuing the potential of digital affordance (Watermeyer et al., 2021). But these synchronous classes were not enough. Learning outcomes had to be tested through the asynchronous mode. Significant challenges in planning for the asynchronous learning environment, fostering students' authentic engagement with module content, and cultivating