

Attention Scarcity: Coping Up With Online Education

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Abstract:

The article seeks to understand attention scarcity faced in online learning as students have transitioned to the online mode of learning abruptly after the pandemic. A study was carried out on students who were learning through the online mode to understand the various sources that take up their attention time thus leaving the students with very little focused time for learning. Among the many challenges the most common seemed the frustration that the students face due to network issues. It concludes that, in order to gain attention from the students, the faculty should increase communication and come up with innovative pedagogies.

Introduction:

(Franck, 2019) states that attention is a commodity similar to wealth which is always deficient in supply and always wanted. We always want others to pay attention to gain some recognition else we feel invisible within and to the world around us. Receiving proper attention from someone is much more rewarding than self-satisfaction yet the irony is we have required to pay attention rather than receive it, thus a payment that we make only with the hope that we would someday own the light when we can collect attention.

The pandemic has brought about a lot of changes in all walks of life and one such change is the nature in which classes are conducted. The sudden shift from face-to-face teaching to the virtual mode brought about a lot of uncertainties both for the students and the teachers. Being a fairly new domain there are a lot of variables at play the impact of which needs a lot of research. There are online MOOCs courses, some are interactive, some are time-bound, some are certificate paid course, some that can be taken at your own pace, some others are completely free and the list is only being added to with platforms like upgrad.com have a complete graduate/undergraduate and even postgraduate program online. However, the immediate question lies in the teaching and learning experience, and whether students can achieve the outcome from the courses taught as effectively as from the offline mode of teaching.

Literature Review:

Lot of studies have focused on the online mode of teaching, pedagogies, assessments, and comparative analysis of online versus offline mode of learning; there are a few studies that have focused on the student's ability to cope up with the online mode of education and the problems they face thereof. The lack of ability to stay focused, the scarcity of attention due to the various other distractions is a cause of concern.

The concept of “attention scarcity” was first stated by Herbert A. Simon, according to Simon attention was the “bottleneck of human thought” limiting our ability to perceive, he also highlighted the fact that more and more information creates a poverty of attention. Later, Micheal Goldhaber pointed out a serious concern stating that the international economy is moving from material economy to attention economy due to the freely available information online. (Source: <https://econreview.berkeley.edu/paying-attention-the-attention-economy>.)

(Society, 2016) Economics is a social science that seeks to understand the allocation of scarce resources with alternative uses. This decision is based on the information of the resources and alternative uses. This has been exploited by the advertising industry and social media to the fullest. According to Herbert Simon, a wealth of information could mean a scarcity of that resource which consumes it, and it is none other than the consumer hence this wealth creates a poverty of attention (Simon, 1971, pg.40)

This attention scarcity is now encroaching upon all the realms of communication as pointed out by (Laermans, 2008) according to him consumers face attention scarcity in almost all facets of communication; political economy, education economy, and business economy. He cites Luhmann and points out that he underrates the simple fact that the selling of commodities or attaining can transpire into power similarly an effective learning process, that demands a minimum of attention from students, their perceptivity is usually not given but has mostly to be raised, even more engagingly produced and there is competition from the point of an individual business company, a singular political party, or the poor teacher who has to instruct rapidly distracted pupils.

When it comes to the education sector the stake is high, given the fact that the future of students’ rests upon the efficiency of the system they use in this case, the switch to online learning needs to be efficient enough to grab the attention of all students. The competition is not only between online learning and other online platforms, the students find other options like working part-time or full-time as attendance to an online class can be managed, there is also an increase in anti-social elements, where students find it entertaining to cause disturbance to the classes , and yet other who are not as self-motivated as their peers may lose interest eventually .The list is endless and is a cause of concern as it may lead to serious issues in the long -run.

(Clark-ibáñez et al., 2008) found in their study that many of the students had little time to devote to a course, when taken online who take online classes have the least amount of time to devote to a course. The possibility of an "easy" class is what lures them the one they can do at their own schedule.

(Balasopoulou et al., 2017) mention various tools for online teaching-learning, Virtual classrooms, the flipped classroom, e-seminars, while the virtual classrooms make use of platforms such as Google Hangouts, Meet, Zoom, Slack, Cisco WebEx, and platforms like Elias, Moodle). Other platforms that allow collaboration are Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Canvas, Blackboard that help the teachers to create programs for training and skill development and educational courses.

Until the pandemic hit us hard the concept of attention scarcity was limited to the consumers as they were the consumers of content, however now this term has become more inclusive to add the category of students who suffer from attention scarcity.

The study aims to find out what problem’s students faced while attending online classes, a survey was carried out on 55 students who were taking online classes as colleges were shut down due to the pandemic, to also understand

the perception of the students as far as the online learning experience was concerned, challenges students to face to pay attention and their preferences.

With an array of choices right from YouTube, Netflix, Amazon prime, shopping sites, and other information available at your fingertips paying attention to an online lecture would indeed be challenging. The faculty too is faced with the challenge of coming up with innovative ideas to create interesting, innovative, and experiential content. The fight for attention is not just with the online content but it is observed that students take up jobs and other engagements as attendance is only marked by digital presence.

(Society, 2016) cited Camerer (2003) who mentioned that limited attention is one of the important topics in behavioural economics. The studies focus processing of information by receivers who are the consumers and their ability to allocating attention that is self-driven. For instance, how do individuals with bounded rationality, allocate a time budget for the acquisition of information from various sources.

The objective is to the various distractions that students face during online learning and how students are coping up with this challenging situation.

Methodology: A mixed method was used where in an online questionnaire was circulated to 60 respondents who were undergraduate students pursuing a BA LLB program. Out of 60 respondents, 55 students filled the questionnaire. The questions asked were directed towards the students learning experience, to understand how students cope up with online learning given the vast pool of distractions that command their attention equally.

Fig.1: 96.4% of the students were a part of online learning

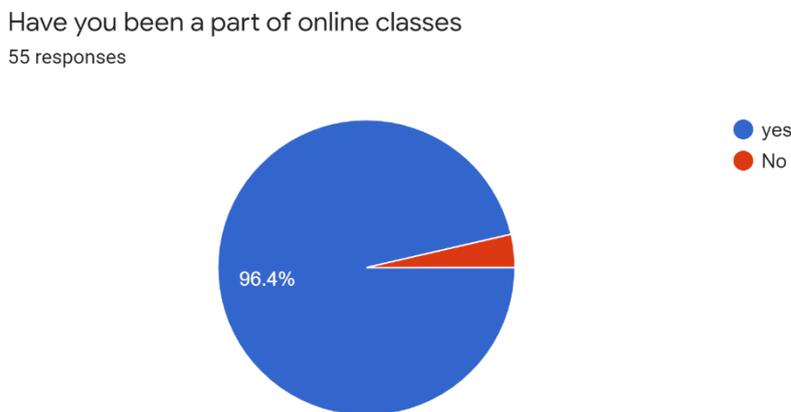


Fig.2: 49.1 % students found the classes interesting and engaging whereas 34.5% students did not find the classes interesting or engaging and 16.4% students seemed unsure.

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Do you find the online classes interesting and engaging

55 responses

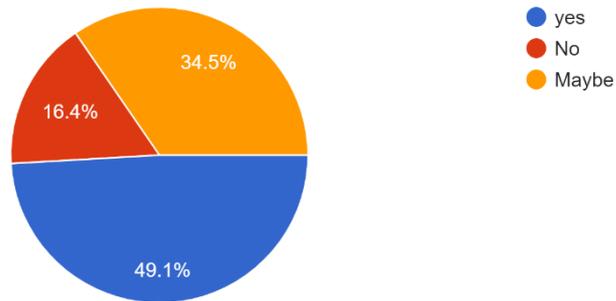


Fig.3: 45.5% of students felt distracted during the sessions, whereas 38.2% could concentrate and the remaining were unsure.

Do you feel distracted during the online sessions

55 responses

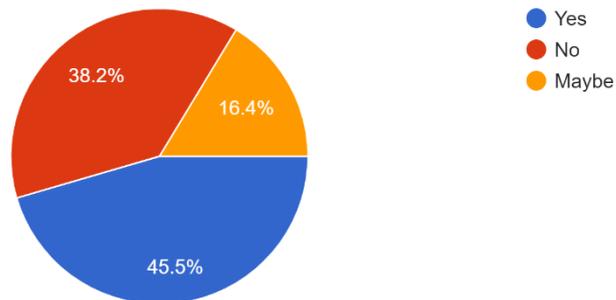
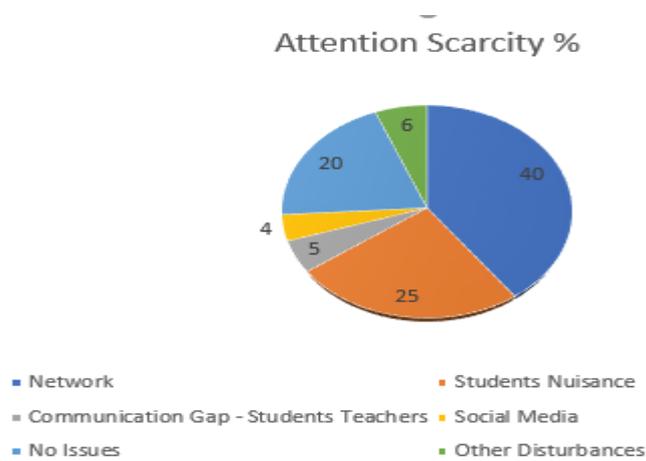


Fig.4:



When the respondents were asked how they cope up with the distractions, the respondents seemed helpless as there was no final solution to the network issues, and as far as other disturbances were concerned some said they simply ignored them.

Results:

It was seen that after the pandemic students immediately shifted to the online mode of learning, this sudden transition did not give time for any perquisites, students grappled with technology with whatever was available then. The very first observation was the connectivity issue, wherein 40% of the students suffered from this issue. The statements made by the respondents reflected the frustration and the fear of uncertainty. As (Singh et al., 2012) pointed out that in the 21st-century teaching is riddled with technology that can provide anytime, anywhere education. Whether this flexibility is efficient or not is a question for research. As this trend intensifies, it leaves a series of questions that remain unanswered with regards to the overall efficiency of the online courses versus their in-class (i.e., offline) counterparts.

(Ni, 2013) one of the important aspects of classroom learning is the interaction between teachers and students, and between students. The ability of students to connect with the teachers by asking questions, sharing opinions is an essential part of the teaching-learning process. Concepts are clarified through discussions, arguments, agreements, and disagreements. These interactions are conducted through discussion boards, synchronous chats emails and other platforms when learning is online, the effectiveness of such an interaction is debatable.

The uncertainty, in this case, is largely contributed towards network issues, followed by nuisance created by students during online classes, the gap in communication between teachers and students, social media platforms, and other such distractions cause a scarcity of attention to online learning.

Conclusion:

The study brings out the fact attention scarcity in online learning is a serious issue as all students are not self-responsible and self-motivated there has to be a nudge from the instructors in such a manner that it gains more effective and interactive attention from the students. There is a lot of uncertainty and confusion among students about online learning, network issue being the frontrunner, to add to it the attention of the students can be diverted because of nuisance created by other students and because of a lot of information and platforms easily available to them; this makes online learning a herculean task. Not all students can cope up with online learning and some find it extremely difficult to concentrate given these distractions. From this study we would recommend that students should be given proper guidance and support at every stage of the teaching-learning process, blended learning would be more efficient than complete online learning. The communication between teachers and students should be consistent and frequent to avoid further damage. Online learning is still in its nascent stage and every day new avenues are explored making it still a topic for research.

(Ali et al., 2004) inferred that Online courses require students to be able to effectively communicate with teachers and peers, to be self-motivated and responsible with the support of technology Their personal qualities and cultural upbringing impact their performance.

(Kenzig, 2015) The interaction and development of learning communities are of immense importance when it comes to online learning, but they are apart from the traditional ways of interaction and development. Off-line

students can rely upon "deep" conversations which may not be possible online hence, instructors need to find an alternative path to arrive at the same outcome.

(Kearsley, 2018) Points out that online learning is not for everybody as cited in (Kearsley, 2002) He believes that only learners who are strongly motivated or are not comfortable in traditional classroom settings are more successful in online learning, similarly, he also believes that not all learning can happen online hence the challenge is to identify those learning situations as well as learners that present the best opportunities for this form of learning.

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