[**Sink or swim**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629104/sink-or-swim)

[Neda Mulji](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8398/neda-mulji)Published June 13, 2021

The writer is senior manager, professional development, at Oxford University Press, Pakistan.

AS uncertainty looms, schools have opened and shut down several times in the year. They have had to adapt quickly to changes in learning and assessment and, it has become clearer than ever before, that change in how children access education is not only imminent but critical in the evolving landscape of education. Digital literacy is paramount in helping children stay up to speed with tasks and techniques; a variety of sources of learning is crucial to developing a holistic approach to education, and it is imperative for teachers, school management and parents to work in collaboration to achieve the desired outcomes.

Communication and collaboration have stood out as the primary factors determining how fast and how effectively schools have managed to stay afloat in the face of tough odds. They have had to devise new, often ingenious ways, of reaching students — many have done this through constant communication with the parents, teaching them to use online tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom, while others have done it through enlisting the help of parents in disseminating instructional videos and worksheets through WhatsApp etc.

To say the least, our resilience and receptiveness to learning has shone bright through the Covid-19 lockdown. Teachers have not only had to learn to embrace uncertainty but also work quickly and relentlessly towards upgrading their digital skills. What this has shown them, above everything else, is that experience is not the best teacher. New learning, experimentation, uncharted territories sometimes hold a far greater promise and potential than establishing a reputation through experience.

Someone once said, quite aptly, “Experience is another name for repeating the same thing again and again”. Experience may be the best teacher, but it also implies heavy reliance on what works, rather than opening the gateway to the exploration of new directions. Had the lockdown not changed the landscape of teaching so suddenly and dramatically, perhaps teachers would not have recognised how the nature of younger people demands juggling online tools, how their attention spans are geared towards browsing, how they enjoy engaging in online tasks that carry a fast momentum, how they are no longer satisfied with learning from one book or one teacher.

What have schools learnt during Covid?

A wealth of knowledge has surfaced as teachers explored quick, effective methods to sustain learning. For example, Khan Academy has been around since 2017 but had a few hundred thousand users until the pandemic helped steer educators in its direction. It now has over 100 million users. Why are we reluctant to up-level our skills and change our working styles until there is a dire need to do so? Educators and educational advisers across Pakistan have spoken about student-centred classrooms for decades now, they have demonstrated ways to move away from the stringent chalk-and-talk regime to no avail, and they have reiterated how memorisation leads to surface learning at best. Sometimes the best advice falls on deaf ears, until we have exhausted the possibility of languishing in our comfort zone.

Many who chose to hold on to the tried and tested ways of learning lamented that young people find independent learning challenging. The pandemic has shown otherwise — children are naturally curious and, when steered strategically with a bit of direction, welcome the flexibility where they can learn at their own pace and time. Post-pandemic schools will have to find ways to incorporate asynchronous learning — children cannot be torn away from their online world anymore, be it video games, social media, etc so we might have to find ways to incorporate learning into their technology-mediated world. The old brick-and-mortar schools may survive only if they allow the presence of an online world within their parameters.

Online submission of homework and marking exams have remained a challenge, particularly for schools that found it hard to operate an honour code — with an inherent trust in the students’ integrity and honesty — but they too might have to make the reluctant switch from paper to Padlet eventually. Difficulty in conducting physical exams may have taught us a new way of assessing, one that calls for monitoring students’ effort and attainment throughout the year, rather than waiting for end-of-year exams when students cram up realms of content presented in textbooks.

There has been a general awareness that the opportunity gap in access to technology needs to be addressed quickly and effectively. Online education has no doubt exacerbated the capitalist divide but it has also shown us that money does not necessarily buy expertise — willingness to explore, learn and adapt to change is essential. More than deadlines, students respond to reassurance and encouragement. Holding on to old ropes isn’t a great idea — they will snap eventually or may become entirely redundant.

*The writer is senior manager, professional development, at Oxford University Press, Pakistan.*

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