

Altered Notion of Time, Space and Privacy: Teaching in times of the COVID Pandemic

Abstract

Based on an exploratory study, this article centers on teachers' reflections on their experience of online teaching during COVID-19. Revolving around the work versus home distinction, it delineates how the experience of an online classroom whilst being present in the comfort of homes, has if not completely then significantly altered the women's perception of work. It primarily focuses on the binaries of work-leisure and private-public and how these have been affected. The methodology is narrative based, conversational interviews, conducted with female instructors at university level in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, who have had to adapt to online teaching since the start of the pandemic. Women struggled with their private, domestic space being made public via the online class with their cameras and recordings. This was experienced under the backdrop of the cultural, patriarchal values, which altered women's perception of work.

Key words: *Online learning, Co-Vid, work-leisure, public-private*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a life changing experience for individuals across the globe. It has created circumstances in which the world had to instantly adapt to avoiding the public space and the risks that came with it. Upon realizing that the need of the hour is adjustment, rather than avoidance, different professional spheres adopted varied adaptation strategies to strike a balance between work-home life, with most of the world's workforce being quarantined. In the education sector, this meant that the universities in the developing world, which had previously viewed electronic media as an alternative to studying, were forced to depend on the virtual space to continue their job of educating the youth. As of July 2020, 98.6% of the children and youth in 200 countries were affected by the pandemic (United Nations, 2020) where homeschooling and virtual classrooms became the need of the hour to make learning possible (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Considering the fact that the education sector is the base for socio-economic growth, without the transformation of teachers and their adaptability, the quality of education would be at risk (Memon et al., 2010). However, this conversion of the classroom to virtual space was not without its challenges, especially for a country like Pakistan, where technology itself is a privilege.

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While e-learning tools have played a vital role all across the world during this pandemic, facilitating student learning, (Subedi et al., 2020) it proved to be a challenge in the developing countries. Identification of these challenges with regard to the students relate to the accessibility, flexibility, affordability, life-long learning and educational policy (Murgatrottd, 2020). However, challenges faced by teachers in the same environment have not been highlighted as often. Teachers are the most critical component of any education system and their performance is dependent on the management structures and environment within which they are required to perform their roles (Memon, 2007). With both being drastically changed with the advent of COVID, this led to teachers struggling to adapt to their changing teaching environment. Apart from the technical issues faced, there were also some cultural and personal issues, which have been seldom talked about or analyzed.

This article focuses specifically on women in the education sector, working as lecturers in universities, whose perception of work was altered as a result of mandatory online teaching during the Co-Vid pandemic. Focusing on reflections of these women, the article carries out a thematic analysis under the domains of space, privacy and time, analyzing how within these domains, the binaries of public-private and work-leisure were blurred.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early in 2020 with the onset of pandemic, similar to other spheres of life, the education sector was hit hard. COVID 19 was officially declared by WHO as a pandemic in March 2020. And with the pandemic getting out of control the decision to shift education to online mode was taken across the globe; a much needed yet ad hoc decision leading to unplanned transition. The entire education system was to be shifted online irrespective of grade, degree and type of education. However, given the inadequacies and incompetence of the system; this shift was neither swift nor efficient. Risk involved with change can be temporary if the change is a step towards sound strategic goals and incremental improvement (McNeill, 2011). However, in this case, faculty at universities, who already were struggling with existing issues within the traditional education system, were now pressed with new issues (Houlden and Veletsianos 2020).

Virtual Education

Virtual Education is a learning/teaching process derived from the characteristics of distance education. It makes the teaching resources available to the learners on an individual study basis (Morris, 1997). It is an innovative instructional paradigm that is supported by technologies that assist in instructions, like Learning Management System, Youtube and Video Conferences (Hussain, 2012). The general understanding is that virtual education is intelligent learning, which aids in an effective teaching and learning process (Ghorbani, 2012). With the new system of remote/digital/online learning, which was already known as virtual education, new issues emerged on a daily basis. These were not limited to the lesser developed countries, but extended to the “developed” world. Blume’s extensive study on the issues faced by teachers in Germany with reference to digital learning is insightful (Blume: 2020). In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission, in order to avoid any educational loss of students, instructed the universities to shift online. Especially since virtual education itself is an emerging concept, the general public’s knowledge is limited to the formal education system (Hussain, 2007) which

means that such a massive shift in the entire education system in a developing country like Pakistan posed serious challenges, argues Mahmood (2020). Virtual education assists in the provision of educational activities 24/7, at any time and at any place. Students may make convenient study schedules according to their own time and place, without disruption in the daily routines (Hussain et al., 2019). Not only do the learners have the opportunity to attend the lectures but also interact with their tutors through technologies that are highly interactive (Kearsley, 2000). Even before the pandemic, the general consensus was that virtual education is student-oriented rather than instructor driven approach in a classroom (Dastijerdi, 2013) where the online learning programs and their creation was more time consuming and faculty who design them had to be compensated (Siddique, 2013). However, with virtual education the need of the hour, it was required of the instructors to adapt and teach in a virtual environment.

Virtual Education and Online Teaching

One of the major issues faced within a virtual environment was the lack of skills, since online teaching requires a special skill set. Online teaching and learning imply a certain pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), mainly related to designing and organizing for better learning experiences and creating distinctive learning environments, with the help of digital technologies (Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P. *et al.*: 2020) which is considerably different from the customary, mainstream form of learning. A whole new process of learning new forms of teaching and unlearning or revisiting traditional forms was experienced by the faculty. Technology requires teachers to take more of a facilitator's role, rather than an authoritative one, which conflicts with traditional teaching methods. Many online guides and manuals appeared advising teachers on the dos and don'ts of online teaching (Bates 2020, Gewin, 2020). Much of this advice focuses on tools and materials that teachers can use to replace their face-to-face classes. In addition, teachers have been offered hundreds of 'tips and tricks', mostly without the contextualizing knowledge needed to judge which teaching tactic is likely to work where (Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P. *et al.*: 2020) The varied ways this new form of teaching affected individuals led to a change in the habitat of the teachers; habitat being "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them' (Wacquant 2005). The change in habits and habitat of the faculty's experiences of online teaching is the focus of this article.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research was within the qualitative paradigm, where the data aided in understanding the concepts and put emphasis on the voices of the participants. The focus was on narratives, which would allow the experiences of the respondents to take center stage. The data collection methods used were conversational, unstructured and in-depth interviews, and a purposive sampling method was used to identify the respondents. For the purpose of the research, 20 respondents were interviewed from public and private universities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Thematic data analysis was carried out in order to identify, analyze and interpret common themes emerging from the qualitative data acquired.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The narratives of the respondents were analyzed, and three domains were identified, which signified the work versus home distinction, systematically providing an understanding of the teachers' perception of work during online teaching.

Space

The first domain identified was that of space, which was largely associated with the teachers ensuring that they transform their domestic space into some semblance of professional space on the camera, to lend authority to their presence on the screen. To achieve this, almost all of the respondents stated that they designated a specific place in their homes to take their classes. According to a female respondent:

“I did designate a spot in my house, it was my drawing room so it was a secluded corner so it helped me a lot especially since my classes were early in the morning. I basically created a space for myself which was completely quiet, till the afternoon at least.”

The emphasis here is on the designated space being in the drawing room, which is the only room in one's house which serves the purpose of accommodating strangers or guests. The choice of this room, for the respondent, was symbolic of her not letting the students into her domestic space i.e. her bedroom or lounge. It was her attempt to keep this breach of her domestic space in control. This was partially also because she wished for complete silence during her class. This is associated with her need to ensure authority while taking the class because lack of control over background noise relinquishes it. This is exemplified by another respondent:

“It (online class) never gave the environment of a classroom because of the house chores going on around the house, presence of children, even birds chirping outside the window. When your phone vibrates, it distracts you because you wonder who is calling, since you are at home and in the middle of the domestic space.”

The respondent, in clearly defining it as her domestic space, puts emphasis on the fact that it is filled with distractions in the shape of house chores, children and even chirping of birds. Psychologically, when one is physically present at home, even something as simple as a phone call can be a distraction. The chirping of birds may be seen as something mundane, but another respondent narrated an experience that says otherwise:

“When I started taking the online classes, I was very conscious of any loud noise around me that would disrupt the lecture on my end. Once, I was speaking and two crows started crowing right outside my window. They were so loud that I had to stop talking. I could see some of the students smiling, and I had difficulty retaining my authority and the thread of my lecture.”

From this experience, we can extrapolate that any kind of noise - even one that is outside the teacher's control - jeopardized their semblance of a professional space within their domestic space, and in turn, their authority. This is the reason why most of the teachers made it a priority to separate their domestic and professional space by assigning allocated spaces for themselves. This is further explained by another respondent:

“I didn’t want to take the class from my bed. Chair seems a bit more action oriented. The desk with its chair, gave resemblance to a classroom. It was comfortable because I had my tea and biscuits with me on the side. The table was divided: space for my notes, for my laptop, and for my snacks. I looked forward to taking a class from the table then.”

According to this respondent, she further divided her table, on which she took her classes, into separate allocated spaces: for notes, for laptop and for snacks. This also gave her the control over this neutral space that she had designated to act as her class room. Therefore, when the boundaries were blurred within her sense of space, she dealt with it by controlling the neutral space assigned within her domestic space.

In the blurring of boundaries between domestic and work space, it was also evident that the teachers didn’t want to let their students view their domestic space via the camera. They stated:

“I was not comfortable with switching the camera on, because it was like I was allowing my students inside my home. Even in university, I have office timings to keep boundaries. Online teaching threatened this.”

“In the beginning, we (students and I) made a Facebook group, where the course content was shared. I normally wouldn’t have done that (interacted with my students on a social media platform) because they would be able to view my personal profile.”

With specified work timings, teachers maintained boundaries with the students even in university. This was threatened when the domestic space and professional spaces were blended together and their online personal presence clashed with their professional presence as a teacher. With this, the domain of space was also intertwined with the domain of privacy, because personal presence online and domestic space are built on the premise of privacy, which was invaded when the boundaries between the teacher and students were tested with the invasion of personal space. Closely linked are issues specific to women working in the public sphere within a patriarchal system. For one respondent, who always found it difficult to convince her family that her going for work is similar to her husband’s job. And while the latter gets acknowledged and appreciated for contributing to his family by “the sweat of his brow”, the former’s work in the public space is mostly interpreted as her leisure time and/or time away from her primary responsibilities, that is, motherhood. However, she received support from other members of the joint family in the form of child care. With this new system of “work from home” this support was lost.

“I hope that normalcy resumes soon and I am able to go back to the office for work. Even if I am taking a lecture and no matter the innumerable repeated requests for private space and time during lecture hours; if my boy is crying he is brought straight to my room. The mother has to take care of the child, not grandmother, not aunt, not even father; only the mother! What can one do! It is embarrassing. And I feel guilty for not being able to give due attention to both: my work and my children.”

This lack of familial support for women’s professional work within the domestic space is a complaint that resonated in many interviews that we conducted. Even the husbands who were

faced with similar issues under the current pandemic, failed to show the concern that women had when their husband was working. Another respondent narrated satirically that her husband's "urge to use the restroom" during her lecture hours is much higher than compared to any other hour during the day. She soon revised and said he would just come to the room where she was working for one or the other task that could have waited. Whether embarrassingly or satirically, the respondent pointed to lack of support from the family as a major issue. The findings indicate that there was a distinction between personal and professional or neutral space within the homes and the teachers attempted to maintain control and authority by reducing external elements like noise, division of neutral space to suit their needs, and in many instances, tried to keep the professional space separate when the boundaries with students were blurred by the use of electronic media for interaction.

Privacy

In the domain of privacy, the findings again indicate the distinction between domestic and professional privacy - both concepts emerging from the narratives of the respondents. As mentioned above, privacy was intertwined with the concept of space and how, in spite of specified allocation of space within their homes, the teachers struggled to retain the element of privacy. According to a respondent (who is also a mother):

"I had my own bedroom designated for the class. I think if you have kids around, it's difficult to make them understand that their mother is taking a class and they have to be quiet. So I had to mute the microphone whenever my child came into the room. Because I could not lock the bedroom while at home."

Here, there is a need to investigate the concept of 'domestic privacy', which is mostly faced by female teachers when taking an online class in their homes. Since they were also simultaneously taking on their roles as mothers, in the vicinity of their domestic space: the boundary between work and home was blurred because of their presence in their homes. Since the teacher is the one delivering the lecture, they have to keep their microphone unmuted. This means that any sound or disruption in the background, whether it's their children or other voices in their domestic sphere, would instantly be relayed to their students. Another respondent's experience added to this:

"Initially, the department notified that all the teachers and students have to turn on their cameras and keep the microphones unmuted. With time, they realized that they need to allow for muting the microphone because there are other people in the house as well and if you are sitting in a communal space, then people will be talking in the background."

In the early days of adaptation to online teaching, there were a lot of rules and regulations set, especially for the teachers, by the universities' administrations. The unmuted of microphones and video cameras being on in the duration of the lectures was one of these. As the respondent noted, this was not practical, mainly due to the concept of 'domestic privacy' at both ends: one has only so much control over other people in the house. One respondent said with a laugh:

“Once I was taking my class and I had explicitly told my husband that I was not to be disturbed. He forgot and barged in the room, asking me where I had kept his socks. This was very embarrassing for me.”

This incident demonstrates how invasion of domestic privacy can also threaten the authority of the teacher even in a virtual classroom, because this gives the students an opportunity to make them the subject of amusement. The embarrassment felt would also throw the teacher off and would have affected the quality of the lecture. Other teachers opined that while they were comfortable with the video cameras being turned on, what they were not comfortable with was the recording of the lectures. The recordings were intended to provide accountability to both teachers and students, and a way for absentees to catch up to the delivered lectures at their own time. For the teachers, however, this led to a higher level of difficulty when trying to maintain their domestic privacy:

“Since the lecture was being recorded, it was also recording what I said in the middle of the lecture to my son, who interrupted sometimes. I was very conscious of when to mute and remember to unmute. It was very difficult.”

Due to the recorded lectures, the teachers were conscious of the fact that any interruptions during their lecture were being cemented in the virtual space and could be revisited by the students or the administration at any time. Thus, not only was it out of their control because of the reversal of spaces, this invasion of their domestic privacy was also being documented so the binary of public-private was reversed. The mandatory recording is also linked to the concept of ‘professional privacy’:

“I felt comfortable with my video on, only for the purpose of effective content delivery with non-verbal gestures. However, the issue was that it was being recorded so the usual jokes that I tell in the classroom or personal narratives, I stopped telling those. This affected my relatability with the students and led to boring lectures.”

When professional privacy was breached, this impacted the quality of the lectures delivered by the teachers because they were conscious of the fact that they were being recorded. According to the respondents, the notion of professional privacy also had to be altered because of the overlapping of communication via media:

“I usually don’t share my personal number with anyone except the class representative. However, with online teaching, we were required to make Whatsapp Groups for the class so that everyone could keep up to date. The students then thought they could contact me personally, at any time. My phone number entered my professional space, which I was not comfortable with.”

According to the findings, the boundaries of private and professional were blurred with the advent of online teaching. What was ‘need of the hour’ became essential, while the teacher’s professional privacy took a back seat. Here, the domain of privacy intertwined with the domain of time, because with the personal number at students’ disposal, they were able to message/call

the teachers at any time of the day. For the students, this was not viewed as unethical because their classroom and its teacher existed in the virtual arena and they felt they were at liberty to contact them. However, for the teachers, this was a breach in professional privacy and blurring of the lines when it came to determining what time their ‘work’ ended and personal life started.

Time

The perception of time can be analyzed not only in terms of the work versus leisure binary, as stated previously, but also in terms of being conscious of the class time and punctuality. One of the respondents related her punctuality and efficiency in delivering the lecture to unforeseen circumstances in her domestic space which were out of her control:

“If there was a power outage, then we had to be sure that we had some backup power like UPS or generator. So we had to be very conscious of the time of the class and whether it would be disrupted suddenly.”

Another respondent added:

“I requested the administration that my classes be shifted to early in the morning so that I could ensure that my child and husband were asleep. It was so difficult because they were also home due to Co-Vid so I had to schedule everything around when I would be alone.”

Therefore, since the domestic space rife with unforeseen elements that would disrupt their class, the teachers had to be conscious of taking their class at a time when they would be disturbed the least: whether it was due to power outage or family members. However, this was also very complicated because the students were far from accommodating:

“Delivering the lecture was also a challenge because students were not punctual in waking up in the morning (my class was at 8.30 am) and it was very annoying and distracting for the teacher to wait until the entire class woke up and was online, to start the lecture.”

Due to lack of punctuality by the students, precious time was wasted once the class started. The balancing of authority versus cooperation became difficult because according to the respondents, one could not ascertain who was actually having connectivity issues and who was lying, so they had to accommodate the lack of punctuality. According to a respondent:

“Honestly, with so many students, it was difficult to keep track of who was still in the meeting and who was not. After some time, I stopped calling them out because it was distracting and a waste of time.”

Students had to be allowed to ‘leave’ the class early, because of yet again, blurring of the boundaries between what was acceptable in a virtual space, versus in a physical classroom. Even if the students left without asking for permission from the teacher, it had to be acceptable for the latter. This was also a challenge for authority and control which had to be relinquished at a certain level. It can be seen, from the analysis of findings, how the perception of work was altered in the intertwined domains of space, privacy and time. The blurring of boundaries between domestic space and professional space led to the teachers attempting some form of

control by trying to reduce external disruptive elements and trying to have an allocated professional space within their domestic space. However, with the invasion of their personal/domestic space, they also experienced invasion of their domestic privacy, which was made more challenging with the mandatory recording of lectures. The professional privacy was similarly threatened with the open communication channels, whereby the boundaries between work timings and leisure timings blurred significantly. The teachers experienced challenges to their authority and control in all the arenas and were seen to be struggling with this altered notion of interaction with the students.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we talk about reversals: the sense of space, time and privacy were reversed, as reflected in the experiences of the teachers, where the work versus home and public versus private distinction was lost in the blurring of boundaries between domestic and professional space, domestic and professional privacy and work vs leisure time. The adaptation to these reversals required from the teachers not only relevant skills, but also relinquishing of authority and control to a certain extent. The findings and their analysis indicate how the binaries of work-leisure and private-public have been affected in the female teachers' experience of taking online classes during the Co-Vid pandemic. The themes that emerge center around control, authority and the cultural context, ranging from trying to maintain authority by controlling the neutral space from where they took their classes, to difficulty in maintaining domestic and professional privacy in the face of recording of lectures to issues of punctuality and domestic life disrupting class time. The women's perception of work was altered in the context of their domestic space and privacy being invaded by their work. They struggled with their private, domestic space being made public via the online class with their cameras and recordings. This was also experienced under the backdrop of the cultural, patriarchal values where the women were expected to also carry out their roles of mothers and wives in lieu of their presence within the domestic space, regardless of whether they were working or not. In identification of the three domains, we have attempted to systematically analyze how the boundaries between private-public and work-leisure have been blurred but we also acknowledge the fact these three domains are also intertwined with each other. Further research on each domain would be fruitful in investigating how online teaching has changed women's perception of work.

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