Traversing the Screens

Permission to let in on the students' spaces

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What was first seen as a vacation and an unplanned break from the arduous college life, quickly turned into a lifestyle. There was a paradigm shift in education, brought about by the pandemic. When some thought that an institution of opportunities like a college campus cannot be replaced with a screen, others saw that what is beyond the screen is another institution of opportunities. Design students are often the last ones remaining on the university campus, with models, sheets, laptops, portfolio and under-eye bags. They're seen in the studio, sleeping on the tables, unpinning their work, crying in the canteen, arguing in a group, or quietly reading a book. They come in bunches, make their presence felt, with their meticulous discussions, weird fashion, and an exuberant personality. With the help of a questionnaire, the journey of a design student from a design college to online college can be mapped out.

The questionnaire was sent to students from age 18-21, mostly belonging to the first and second year of college. This included students of different colleges such as Department of Design, and Institute of Architecture and Planning, Nirma University, National Institute of Design, MIT Pune and Academy of Architecture, Rachana Sansad, Mumbai, and different fields such as communication design, industrial design and architecture. They are from different parts of the country, and all have diverse family and economic backgrounds. Through this form, their family scenarios, details about where they live and personalities were understood. Different people, with different interests opened up, and responded honestly, with their views. They provided information about their family relations, and how they attend classes, what devices and platforms they use, their hobbies and preferences, performance and problems. They talked about their responsibilities at home, and towards their friends and college. They were candid about their mental health, and their struggles. They complained about their difficulties and gave suggestions and opinions. They helped understand what being in a design college looks like, online.

They all mostly have 1-5 members in their family; some have 6-10 members and a few even more than 10. And although mostly all of them have their own devices, a phone, a laptop, or a tablet, some families share multiple devices or even one laptop among themselves. None of the students, or at least the ones who responded are responsible for generating money in their households, except for their little personal earnings through internships or commission work. They all have 1-3 earning members in their family, mostly the parents, but sometimes even the father and grandfather, or father and uncle, in business. They all belong to a moderate to high-income economic background. The parents of students from the state of Gujarat are mostly business owners, from Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Navsari. etc. Other occupations include engineers, doctors, sales people, professors/teachers, pharmacists, service and government employees. While the business owners have found their ways around the pandemic to keep their business thriving from home, doctors and engineers have had to go to work despite the pandemic. The teachers and professors are the ones who have to be online for classes or work.

It was found out that mostly 1-2 members of the family have to be online for classes or work. In a few families with teachers/ professors or engineers as earning members, 2-3 members have to be online, while in joint families with over 10 members, 4-5 members have to be online. They had their own rooms.

How many members of your family need to be online for classes/work ?
25 responses

- 1-2
- 2-3
- 4-5
- more

24%

72%
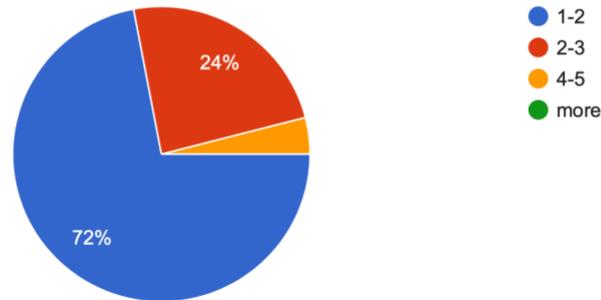
The students use online platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, Cisco Webex etc. the most popular among them being Google Meet as it is found to be more convenient by the students for its ease to generate links for meetings and using the same links over and over again. It is even appreciated for its screen presentation feature, where the viewers can see everything on the screen from the starting point of the presentation, and the quality of its interface and Internet usage. Students attended classes on Google Meet, and even scheduled doubt sessions and discussions among themselves. They also used it for keeping up with their college clubs and extracurricular, such as music club, film club, attending 'by students for students' workshops and even welcomed the new batch online. The students use 4G data packages, home Wi-Fi and hotspot. While most of them have fast Internet connections. Weather conditions in Mumbai and Kollam, Kerala, and absence of better internet packages and low network strength in certain areas like Navsari, Daman, Gandhidham and other connectivity problems are the main reasons the internet could be slow, not allowing students to join classes. The students have good to perfect attendance and they spend an average of 5 hours online per day. The 20% of students who spend more than 6 hours online are architecture students as the rigorous course demands more working hours and active one on one discussion.

On average, per day, how many hours do you spend on an online class?
25 responses

- 1-2 hours
- 3-4 hours
- 5-6 hours
- more

32%

20%

8%

40%
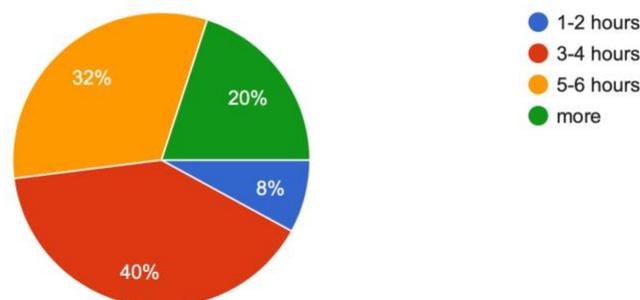
With a change in traditional learning spaces, the students too had to be innovative in creating a space at their homes to work. Students who made an inspiring working environment in their homes seemed to enjoy online classes, but majority of students didn't, depending on their homes and families. On a scale of one to five, one being the least and five being the most, the students who least enjoyed online classes were industrial design and architecture students. Architecture students enjoyed it the least, as they love the collateral bonding time and fun that comes along with spending days and nights in the studio. Among all these students though, there were some who enjoyed online classes irrespective of their fields, as they are personally studious and adaptive students, who thought everything was very smooth, and some students, who didn't enjoy classes at all, not for any particular reason except their own cynical perspectives and personalities.

They quickly attained normalcy for online education, with its own sets of pros, cons and perks. Sitting in an appropriate light and position, response and active participation in class, joining in time and being attentive and interactive, making sure your mic is off and there is no disturbance in the background and switching on the video when asked to were considered 'online etiquettes.' There are a chunk of students who don't feel comfortable in switching on their videos in class sometimes for a few reasons.
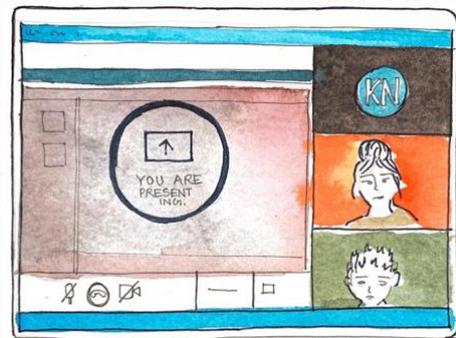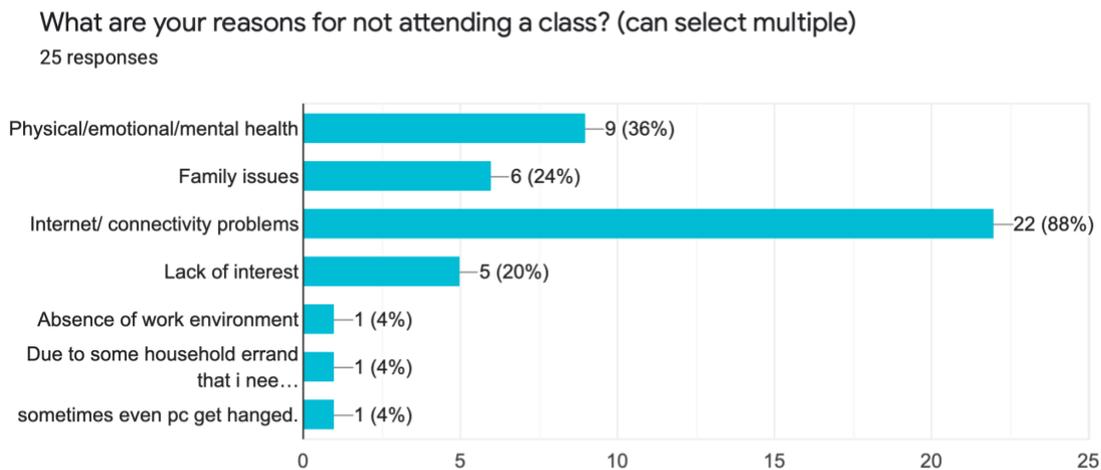

If no, choose why.

9 responses
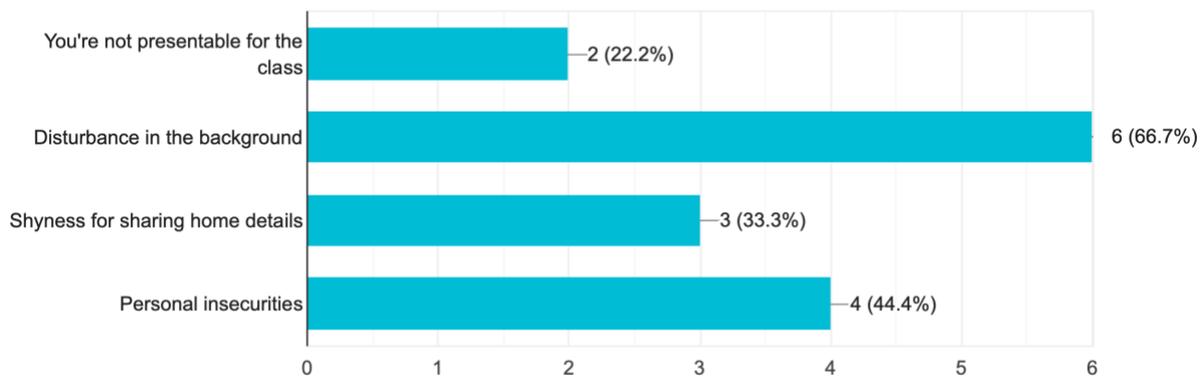
A lot of absenteeism was observed throughout the span of a course. When studying online, it is usually expected that the students must attend a class as they are doing it from the comfort of home, and the reasons of absenteeism on campus don't apply. In an online class however,

new reasons of being absent emerge.

What are your reasons for not attending a class? (can select multiple)
25 responses

| Reason	Count
Physical/emotional/mental health	9 (36%)
Family issues	6 (24%)
Internet/ connectivity problems	22 (88%)
Lack of interest	5 (20%)
Absence of work environment	1 (4%)
Due to some household errand that i nee…	1 (4%)
sometimes even pc get hanged.	1 (4%)

The most common reason being Internet issues, as online education thrives on the Internet. Being physically unhealthy, students sometimes attended classes, as they did it from their beds, in their own time, but mental health played a huge role in the absenteeism. It was observed that the lockdown affected the mental health of the students to a great extent. And the affect on mental health slowly translated to a lack of interest in being productive and creative. In one college, the laid-back attitude and moodiness of the faculty caused the students to take online college very casually. They became defiant, and being anxious or depressed caused them to lay off work. While these students from one college rebelled against the system and boycotted classes, some others from another college simply couldn't get out of their beds, favored by the gloomy weather outside. First year communication and industrial design students were mostly the ones with near perfect attendance.

This is because they were keen to work and get their work reviewed, not wanting to miss out on lectures or important instructions. The absenteeism of architecture students, however, could be directly related to mental heath. They were stressed with the amount of work and long discussions. They sometimes chose to completely shut off their devices, so that they can pretend like they don't have any work. One of them said, "Its like we're living just for giving submissions." While for some students, it worsened with the onset of college, there were others who were impacted by it positively. Depending upon ones personality, for the students with social anxiety and problems connecting to people, online college was a blessing. It was proven to be great for their mental health and it made them calmer. It was a break for some students from the hustle bustle of college. Despite this fact, they felt the absence of a work environment. Other reasons for not attending a class are family/ personal issues, errands, other responsibilities and technical issues, like a computer getting hung.

Talking about being social, and connecting with like-minded individuals, the students agreed that working with peers, and promoting healthy competition is crucial for design education, the only few who didn't agree with this are the aforementioned people who enjoyed online classes due to their introverted nature.

How is your connectivity with your batchmates online?

25 responses

- Never been better
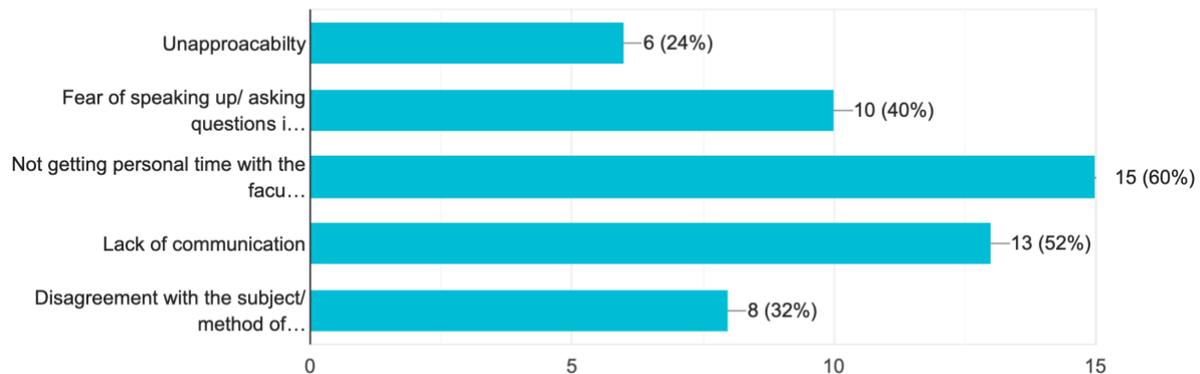- Good
- Okay
- Not at all connected
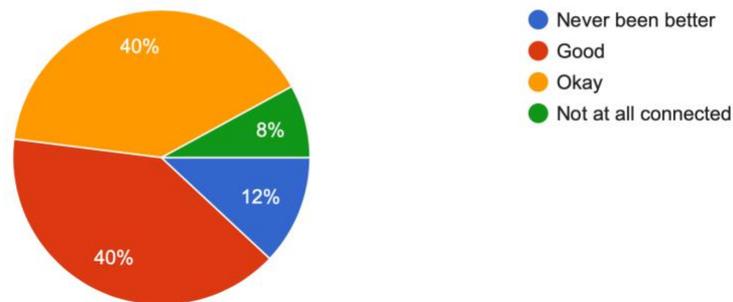
The students' connectivity with their peers depended on them. Some have had fights over the period of lockdown, and some have resolved them. Some decided to distance themselves intentionally and some were the victims of being distanced from. Some had to cope with the sadness of a long distance relationship with a batchmate, reminiscing studio romance. 64% students also thought that group projects with their batchmates are doable but difficult to do. 28% managed well, while 8% strongly believe that they should not be done. No one though, thought that they were smooth. The main concerns of students are inability to reach the group members, difficulty in communication, and unequal contribution. One communication design student also mentioned, "It is hard for me to correct the other person if they are doing something wrong because I wouldn't know." Group projects in architecture are nightmarish under normal circumstances anyway, it got only worse online. One of the students had to deal with their partner not responding to any messages or calls, quitting all socials, and moreover, they even didn't work or show up in class the next day. Clashing opinions, difficulty in generating ideas and difficulty in keeping track of the workflow are other concerns.

Talking about academics, the students had a good understanding of what was going on in the class, other than their own problems with attentiveness. It was interesting to see that Industrial design students, from first and second year, preferred to study theoretical/research based studies communication design students preferred more practical/technical/skill based ones. This may be because the industrial design students were not satisfied with the practical courses as they thought they were being robbed of a better experience in a workshop. Architecture students missed having access to laser cut MDF boards and material to make elaborate site models, but some colleges dealt with this problem as they, "provided alternate solutions allowing students to make more abstract models, focusing more on the concept" in words of a student. A huge number of people believed that it had nothing to do with the course itself, but their preference depended on the faculty and how they handled a course. This applied to students of all fields. One frustrated student didn't have any favourite course and desperately does not agree with online education.

The students found the faculty to be fairly prepared for a course. They did, although face some problems that could only be justified considering the situation of online learning.

What were some of the problems faced by you with respect to the faculty?
25 responses

| Category	Value
Unapproacabilty	6 (24%)
Fear of speaking up/ asking questions i…	10 (40%)
Not getting personal time with the facu…	15 (60%)
Lack of communication	13 (52%)
Disagreement with the subject/ method of…	8 (32%)

Students felt that opinions people have on whether they enjoy online education has a lot to do with the lack of personal time they got with the faculty. There were frustrating times experienced by them when the lack of communication between the students and the faculty caused a lot of confusion and wastage of time. Architecture students couldn't get long and detailed discussions with the faculty like they used to in a studio or canteen or after college. Now, they found it taxing to be online, as it took them days to get a personal discussion and delayed their time to work on their studio design. In some design colleges, the students had the liberty to approach the visiting faculty at their firms/ professional spaces outside of college. Not only that culture has changed, but also the students see the permanent faculty members only on the screen, until they teach and don't have them as a part of their learning environment. In college, a person has the liberty to raise questions or speak to the faculty in their own time, personally or in front of their friends. However, in an online class there is a fear to do so as everyone would be seemingly aware of what you say.
Some rebellious students even had a disagreement with a subject or the method of teaching it. Some even had to, for the good of the students, assume the role of faculty.

When it comes to procuring materials, students living in cities like Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Jaipur, Bhopal, Hyderabad etc. were able to procure materials very easily but students who lived in places like Nagpur, Jabalpur, Surat, Daman, Navsari, Kollam, Gandhidham etc., were not able to get them very easily. They had to suffer through the first few days of the courses to arrange for these materials. It was observed that ID and architecture students suffered the most, even those who lived in metropolitan cities, found it difficult to get the materials required for making complex models.

The students made their submissions via email, Google Drive, Conceptboard etc. Although they found concept board to be revolutionary, they still preferred google drive, as it was easy to access, share and made reviewing work easy. Architecture students loved Conceptboard as they were able to explain their plans and sections on the concept board very easily, with the faculty giving feedback directly on the board. The ability to discuss a design online was enhanced by it. Architecture faculties love scribbling on the students' work to explain or change something, and Conceptboard made it possible to do online. Online juries were conducted for the first time. It was a calmer experience for the students but how the jury went only depended on the students and their performance. Some interesting incidents that were surprisingly common with the juries were stories of plagiarism. Some students used the

concepts/pictures/sketches of other students, claiming it was their work. Some got caught and some didn't. Incidences of stolen work on campus have also switched to an online format.
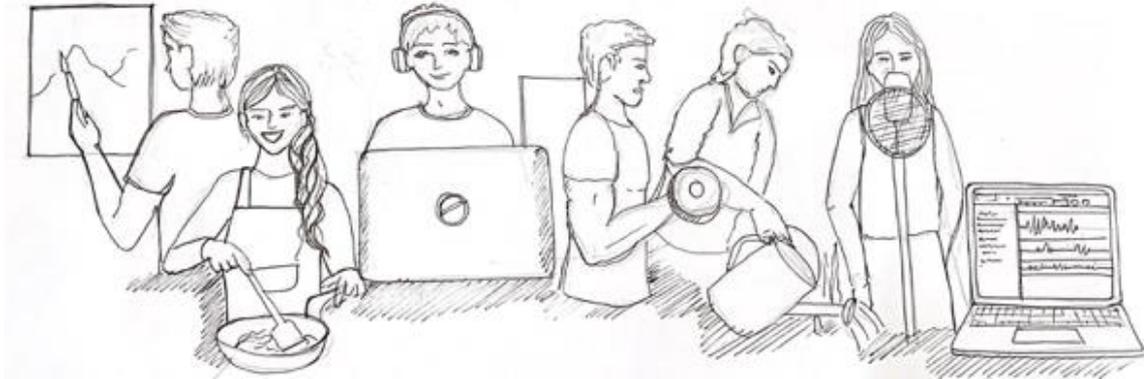
The lockdown was celebrated for bringing out different versions of people. Apart from college, students took up many different types of projects/hobbies. Some of them included reading, baking, cooking, painting, gardening, learning instruments, software, singing dancing, attending online workshops, learning new languages, fitness, coffee brewing, digital rendering, parametric, making films and music covers, indoor sports, internships, commission work and what not. It was observed that students in the second year took up more complex hobbies that had a lot to do with improving their skills in their field. Workshops and internships were also common. Architecture students attended different architecture workshops of various colleges. An ID student used his time to come up with a proposition for an app, the details of which he did not wish to reveal. CD students initiated a film club for their batchmates. With online college, students found it difficult to find time for this. Architecture students found it very difficult to find time for themselves. In an architecture college, the students, after getting free time were encouraged to take up film and art courses with Coursera.

How much have online classes affected your personal projects/hobbies/learning?
25 responses
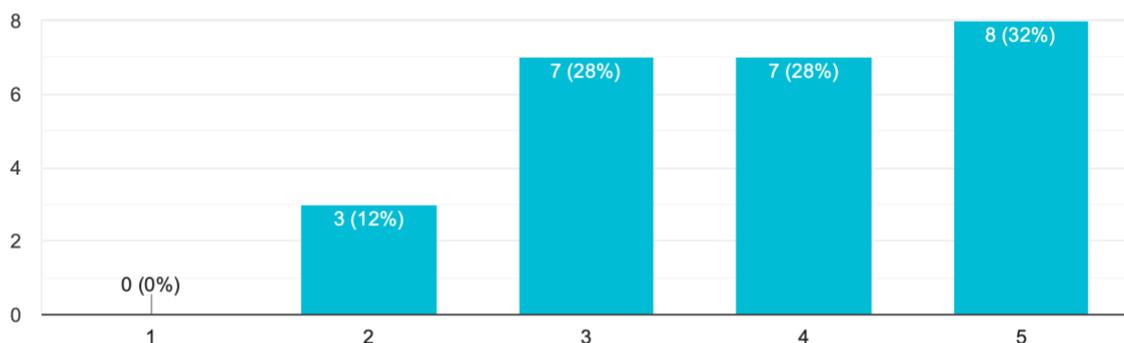
Online college also has affected the relations and time at home. Many students, mostly female students had domestic responsibilities, such as cooking cleaning, ironing, washing utensils etc. helping out in the household chores to lighten the household burden due to the absence of domestic help. Some male students did too, but mostly their responsibilities were

limited to themselves and at most, their rooms. Some families had house help so the students didn't have much work to do, but those who did, were greatly affected by online college and felt the guilt of not being able to help much. Some people thought that online college affected their relations at home to a huge extent. With the classes and abundance of work, they would be cooped up in their rooms, frustrated and sleep deprived and miss meals with the family, or sometimes would not talk at all.

What according to you were positive/ innovative aspects of online design education?
25 responses
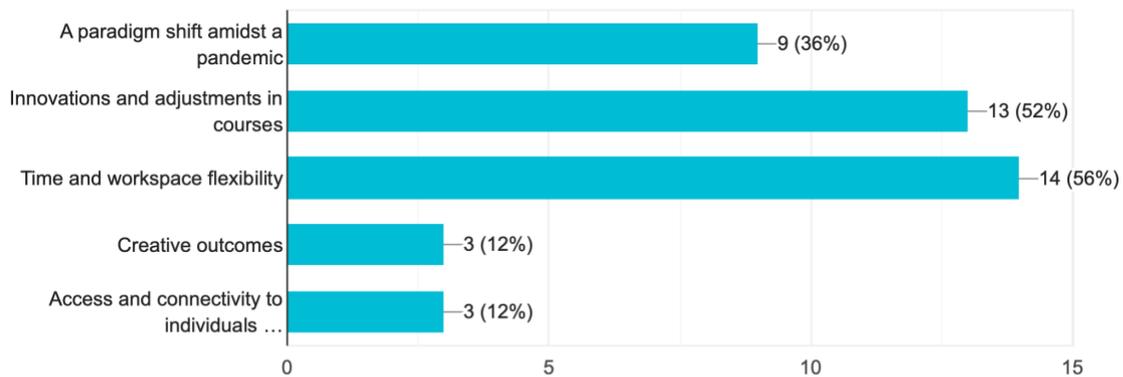
Despite all these challenges, students had a positive attitude and when asked, these were the aspects they agreed on. Time and workspace flexibility was a major relief for the students. When asked to suggest more positive aspects, innovations, deduction in time taken to communicate, learning from each others work and mistakes as they attend every students review session, learning alternative home methods for certain projects and enhancement of creativity, these were the aspects that came forward. One person said, "Takes the mental stress out of the equation so you have a calmer mind which results in better and more productive work."
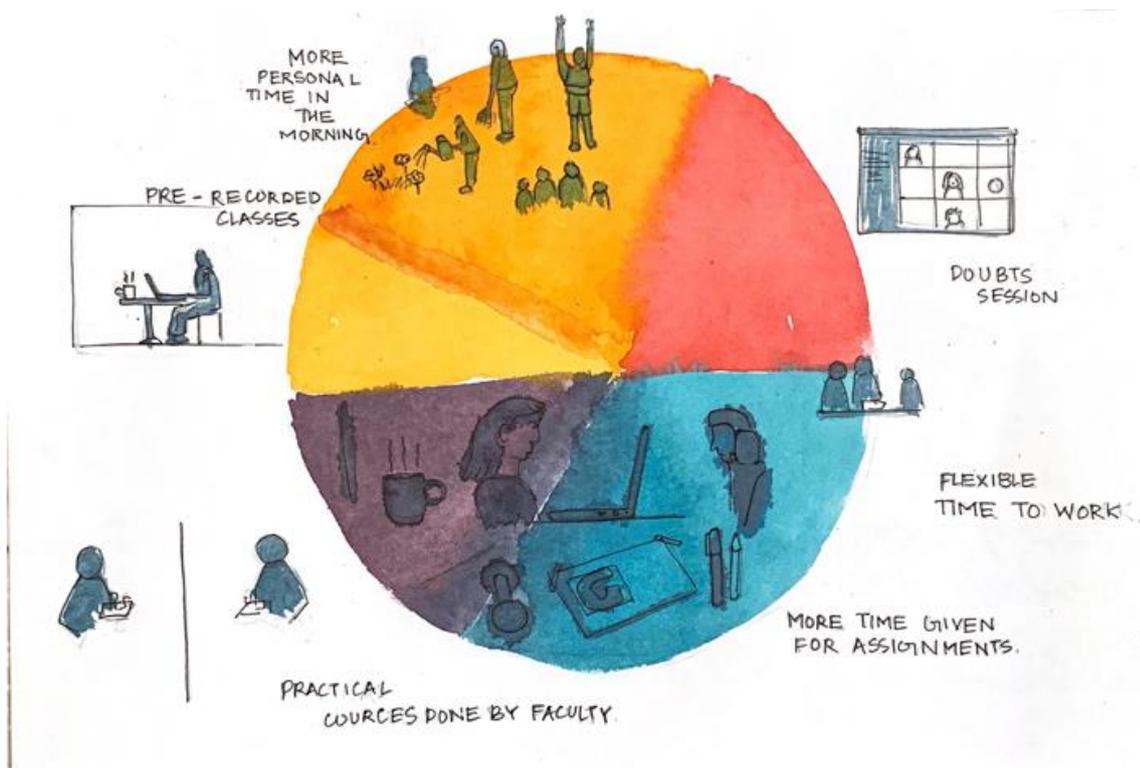
When the students were asked what changes they could bring in the current format of the online classes, they used this opportunity to put forward their complaints. The students expect the online classes to be planned better, with early short classes, and more work time. They wanted flexibility in deadlines. A student complained that there needed to be a proper communication established between the students and the faculty, as their faculty is moody and they barely had three classes in two months. Some suggested an online mentor, and prerecorded classes could make online learning easier, as being in front of the laptop/phone for more than six hours per day exhausted the students. Some students with migraine found it impossible to cope with. Many more ideas included, a doubt session for the students, and fixed number of hours. In an interesting suggestion, the student said that they should do all the practical assignments given by the faculty first so that the students get a better understanding of the subject, and they can design assignments according to availability. Some, positive and sincere, believe that the current format is good enough and the people involved in making this happen are giving their best.

A lot of answers emerged when asked if design education can sustain online. While 68% people said no, some opinionated students think that if it plans to continue, it needs to improve. 8% people believe in it completely, answering yes. Others, rightfully so, think that it depends from person to person. Some love to work alone, while some need peers around them. Some cope with the distance but some need personal attention.

With this array of responses, it can concluded that during these unforeseen, uncertain times, however difficult it might have been to accept online education, especially in a field like design, students realize that it is inevitable. Where the studio used to be a reality portal, away from the alluring parallel digital universe, now, with online education, the universes have aligned. They realize that making the best out of the current situation, unlearning habits and recreating a design environment at home is the only option and has in fact, become the new normal.