

**From Place to Space- Encountering Design
Education Online**

Research Paper by-
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*DESIGN VENTURES INTO THE VIRTUAL-
screen superseding the studio*

Abstract

The shadow of the surfacing situation of novel corona virus looms large. It has stuck life to the second gear. The human race, in all forms is encountering the ring fence that the virus has developed today. While the nature is beneath the veil of vulnerability, the uncertain times have brought an urgent need to adapt in this inexorable situation as life cannot stop.

In the ephemeral times, everything has now shifted to a screen be it work or education irrespective of the age. The world is changing by simply tapping keys. What emerges as omnipotent is the Internet. It encounters the tyrannies of distance.

Online education has thus, become a reality for all in this alternate world. With the need to adapt, studio-based courses like design too, have taken this leap. Design pedagogy widely differs. It focusses more on the outside world whose doors are unfortunately shut. Thus, it becomes important to understand if design education is simply giving in to the times or the adaptation is meaningful and benefitting for both the ends.

The paper is based on a survey sent to design students and it seeks to highlight that it becomes important to analyse how well is the encountering mechanism of remote learning working keeping in mind what surrounds a student (physical, social and mental) considering this transformation. Addressing issues on these lines becomes important as it influences persistence and retention of these courses.

RESULTS

Demographic details and family background

These help to create a base to analyse the extremes in the underlying situation given the fact that, it is the entirety of one's social life right now. 60% of the students had 2-4 family members. 36.7% had 5-6 family members with either or both grandparents. Only 3.3% had more than 6 members that included parents, sibling, grandparents and aunt and uncle.

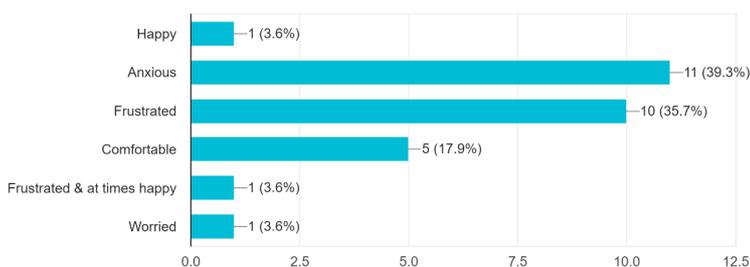
The financial predicament of a family becomes a primary focus point in a time of crisis such as this. Further considering the persisting situation it was more important to understand if they were working in essential services/ government services as this changes the scenario abundantly. While the pandemic is still on, there is an entirely different wind of angst in these homes. This also directly reflects on the difference that these students have to step up to take major responsibilities. 56.7% of the respondents had both of their parents working. Mothers of 22.7% was involved in essential services while fathers of 36%.

In the current times the zone of the city defines the extent of activities and also the physical and mental well-being of the respondent. A majority of 40% of the respondents were located in orange zone followed by 36.7% in the red zone and 16.7% in the green zone.

Mental well-being in persisting situation

The times have not been particularly fairyland wonderful. While the physical world is changing multidimensionally, the mental state is just as much under trauma. The work life of every individual overpowers the emotions. However, times like these force upon us the need to look at what has always been neglected. While work piles, parallelly so do emotions, especially in this unavoidably weak set up. 67% respondents agreed to be in a poor state of mind. Anxiety and frustration were seen as common add-ons.

In the persistent situation, what describes your current state of mind?
28 responses



During the ongoing pandemic, the social and physical environment of a person has been limited to the family and their respective homes. The studios with abundant energy and chatter morphed to four walls. Alterations in living patterns have become

undeniable. Household work became a harsh reality and the worst nightmare. Majority had to spend an average of 3 hours while the rest spent a little less time doing it. There was no respondent male or female who did not have to involve in household work at all. While more females' respondents marked that they had to do household work 'Daily', defying the stereotypes, male were the ones working more frequently.

The fact that as designers we are always juggling work, a change to home environment does not alter this fact. Many of them juggle both housework and online classes simultaneously. These were amongst those whose parents had work commitments due to the fact that they worked in essential services.

The academic alterations and reactions

Due to a paradigm shift, the current virtual learning pattern has taken this juggling to another level.

Firstly, every student has a preferential way in which they absorb, process, comprehend and retain information. Kinaesthetic learners learn best when they can use tactile experiences and carry out a physical activity. Majority of the respondents identify themselves as a kinaesthetic i.e. a hands-on learner. Online education and these respondents are like chalk and cheese.

Handling technology was a cakewalk for majority of the respondents. However, the distinctions in learning patterns were a new experience for a majority. Furthermore, what facilitates the internet is the device that the students use. It is what reduces the distance between a student and a faculty and is the only communication medium. While 83.3% of them used laptops other majority of 63% respondents used a smartphone and sometimes a laptop.

However, what comes with the family is the concept of sharing and it becomes important to understand the liberty of usage in the already constrained time frame of online session and work. It was found that 20% of the respondents used shared devices. Many students brought to notice issues like overlapping schedules and storage issues. While the entire family's connection to the outside world depends on just one device, the liberty of usage decreases. In the words of a student "*I had to limit my assignment uploads as the storage of my mother's laptop was less and her files could not be deleted.*"¹ On further analysis it was found that of those using shared devices, 83.3% were foundation students. The courses revolve around manual skill developments and thus, laptops are not a necessity however, the consequences follow like the trail of ants towards a sugar cube.

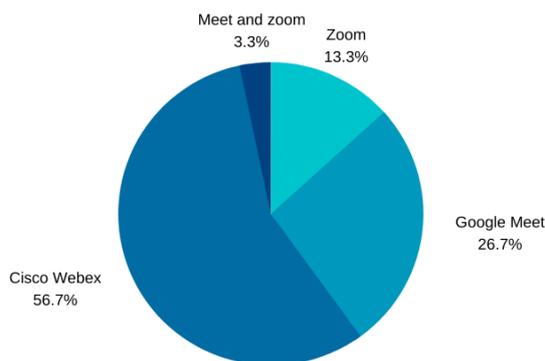
¹ Based on responses collected in a survey, link of the survey-
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdgPUIW8tLCGic7ynKccQpmZlv8jKWePHcUHwO4bIYECAXX8g/viewform?usp=sf_link

- ² “Me and my brother usually share laptop and get frustrated due to clash of classes. I did research work on my phone once.” said one of the respondents.

Encountering tyrannies of distance

After the device comes the platform where both the worlds meet.

Which platform is used by your college to conduct online classes?



On a majority, 53.3% of them considered the platforms to be fair, 30% considered them to be poor and 16.7% considered them to be good. This group of respondents majorly used laptops. This brings the need to understand that the apps were easier to use on laptops in comparison to a phone screen.

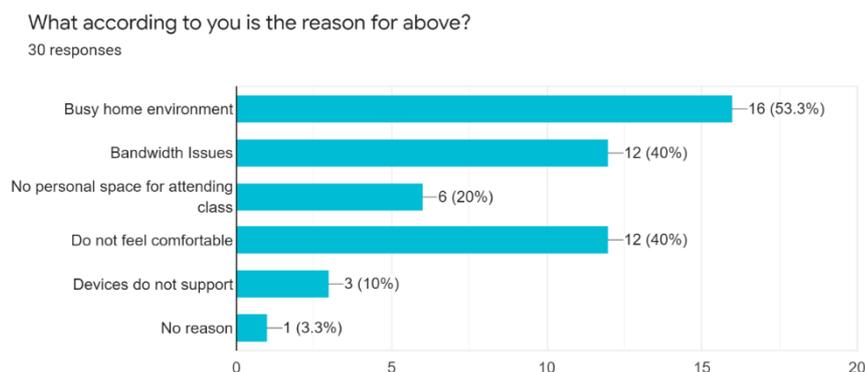
Apart from the fact that these allow you to sit in your pyjamas, the platforms were appreciated for features like screen sharing where a common content could be looked at. Moreover, the ability to view work of others was said to reduce creative distance to an extent. Despite an efficient device, if the internet connection is weak the gap only seems to widen. 60% of the students used a Wi-Fi connection while the rest switched between Wi- Fi and Mobile Data.

Wi-Fi users have readily available data with good speed in comparison to those using mobile data/ hotspot who found internet availability an issue. Low bandwidths, weather issues and data pack limits were found to be common laments. 60% data users resorted to a better data plan after online classes have resumed. Extensive courses like those involving grasping concepts and then translating it to models, those involving visualisation of three-dimensional forms or those that involved simultaneous working by learning from professors had longer sessions. Thus, despite an upgradation the data exhausted and had to be upgraded again.

The only proof of the connection being actually intact across screens is the feature of Audio/Video. 66.7% of respondents found this to be an issue. This also brings

² Based on responses collected in a survey, link of the survey- https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdgPUIW8tLCGic7ynKccQpmZlv8jKWePHcUHwO4bIYECAXX8g/viewform?usp=sf_link

to light that the less approachable students become even more aloof. Apart from connectivity issues, busy home environment, personal level of comfort and no private space to attend class came out as primary reasons for this discomfort. Reason being sharing rooms with siblings and internet connection limited to a part of the house. Unlike studios, there were no designated spaces for the majority students. They raised concerns of unavailable space and shifting places in order to catch good connectivity. Many students feel uncomfortable to turn on audios and especially videos due to busy background of their homes.



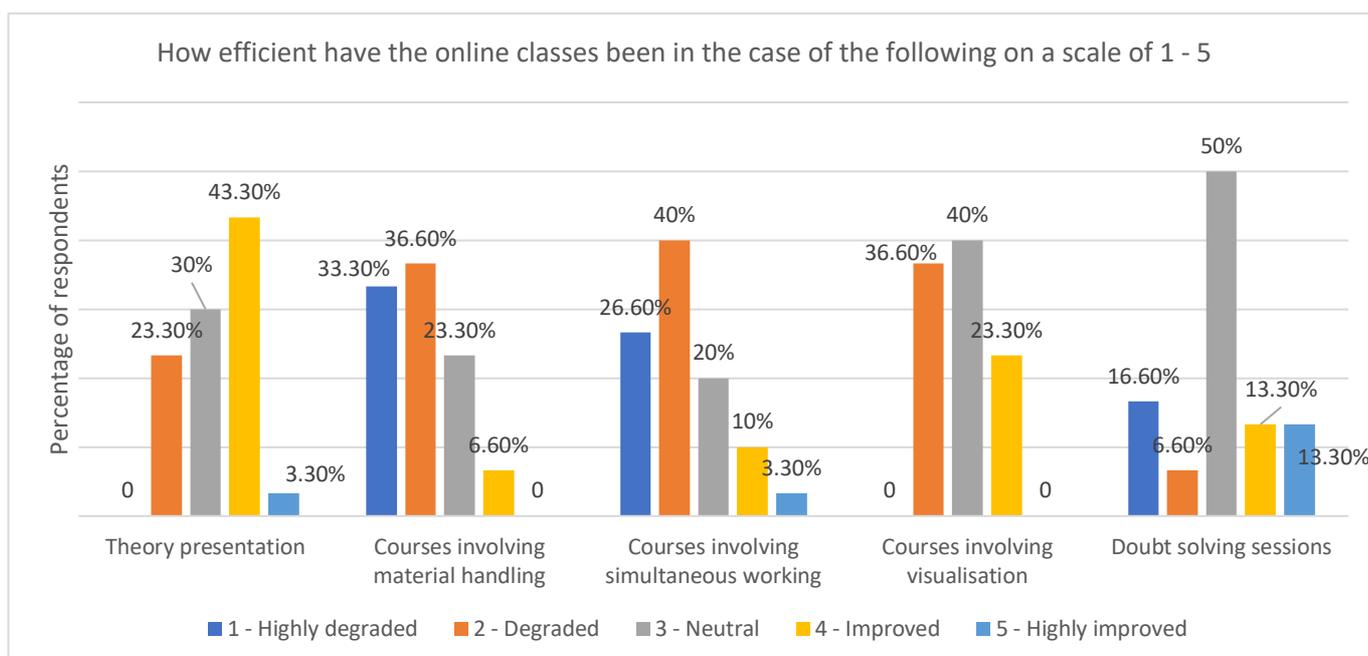
The virtual setting

With the advent of the culture of online learning it also becomes important to understand the duration of delivering the same amount of information effectively as time still remains a constraint and nobody better than designers realise this. The durations varied from less than two-hour sessions to above four hours in a day. The timings for specialisation students were very contrasting. While the second-year Industrial design students had less than 2-hour student- faculty sessions, those in third year had 2-4-hour sessions. However, most of their work involved elaborate model making afterwards. The third year Communication design students had comparatively less duration sessions in stark contrast to second year who had elaborate more than 4-hour sessions.

6.7% of them found the class timings to be very comfortable. 70% of the students considered the class timing as 'Satisfactory', while 23.3% of them found it unable to cope with. From the respondents who found coping up as a difficulty majority were foundation students. Sometimes the sessions used to drag considering the fact that foundation year had to undergo more extensive learning in all areas be it models, basics of design or even theories revolving around the subject. To make sure the concepts were clear for every individual these sessions usually extended, sometimes beyond realisation of the faculty.

Holistic nature of design and its relevance online

Design is multidimensional. A lot is learnt from life experiences. The structure of courses elaborately differs and so do the working patterns. Theory presentations are rated according to 40% of the respondents. They were well articulated and easy to imbibe. While many found them less interesting based on personal choice of topics discussed or the general disliking for absolute theory-based presentations. In stark contrast 70% of the respondents found material handling courses, courses of simultaneous working and those involving visualisation in space or ideas as more tedious and inefficient in remote learning. The synergy of a studio was missing. Space constraints and procuring of materials were commonly faced difficulties. Moreover, the mess created is not acceptable in every household. The rest who found these easy going had less space constraints and did not experience 'unsuitable environment' issues. Although one could also debate that courses involving visualisation brought innovations like using 3-D software which also served as an element of interest for many.

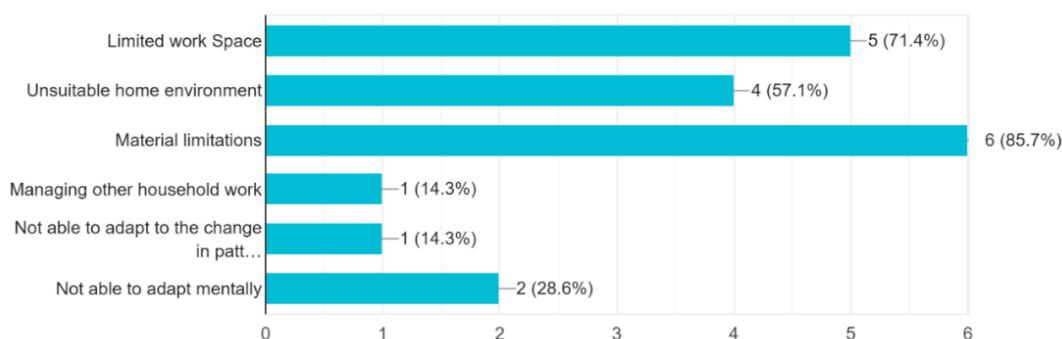


Material availability is a circumstantial obstacle common to almost all. Material availability online directly depended on the zones. However, in case of local availability and transport varying trends were seen. This highlights the fact that the circumstances have become completely adventitious. The only way to survive is to adapt. This comes with two necessities- Physical and mental adaptation. 63.3% respondents found it was manageable to work with alternate materials. However, a considerable percentage of respondents were highly dissatisfied with their work.

Mental adaptation also adds on to a noticeable factor. While the world has shifted gears and a plethora of entertainment and outings amidst busy schedules have been

thrown out of the window, the Gen Z is finding it harder to work and maintain status quo. 28.6% respondents agree that they are mentally unable to adapt to changing times and a sudden shift of learning patterns.

46.6% of the respondent's remark that they strongly agree studio space and environment is more favourable. The designated spaces, interactions, liveliness and a constant growing environment still remains incomparable and the online sessions lack these. Out of the respondents who faced the issue of work space, 90% were in the foundation batch as the lockdown courses required elaborate stationery, materials and storage space too.



A designer is expected to have a panoramic view. However, in case of an online session we become horses with blinders. 60% of the respondents feel that online learning only helps focus on the final product rather than the process. The rest believe that if we are conscious of the blinders, we have all the capability to look beyond what is shown too.

Adding further, 80% of the respondents believe that viewing assignments over a screen is way too misleading. Apart from device errors like camera quality or scanning difficulties majority of them remark that the work is prone to be plagiarised but this clearly cannot be blamed on an equipment, network or a circumstance but conscience. Work ethics like professionalism stand questionable.

Beyond the curriculum

Huge headphones, baggy clothes, tattoos and uncombed hair is an image. However, there is abundance under this shell. With the lockdown, the world of a designer that usually is supposed to have the sky as a limit is replaced by a ceiling and this definitely affects the extent of the exposure as received before. Intangible skills face a threat too.

A designer's most efficient skill to empathize weakened over distances. 33.3% respondents remark that this has immensely deteriorated over remote learning due to lack of communication, distance and the fact that we are not aware of what a peer

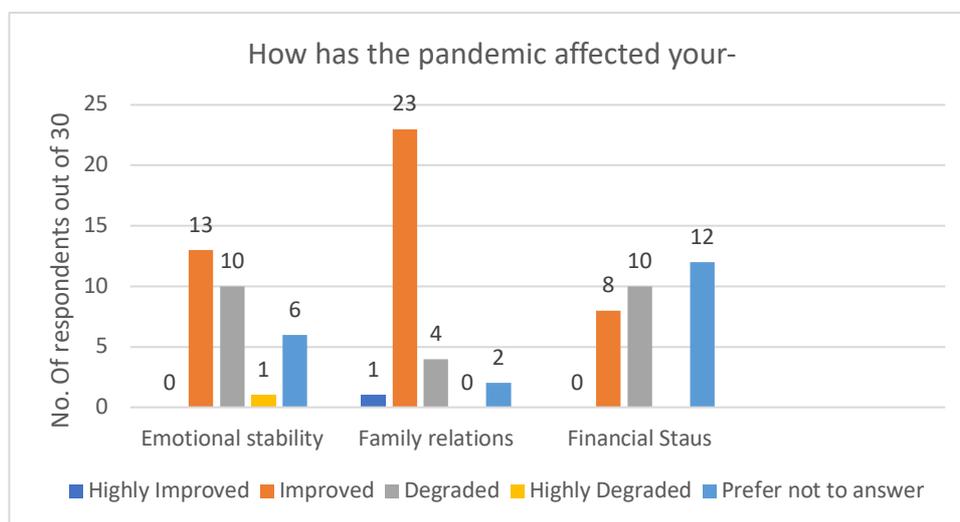
might be undergoing miles away. The chances of imbibing knowledge from practical experiences of outside world has also reduced.

Absence of physical copresence changes the nature of interaction between a teacher and a student and 70% respondents second this. The fact that in studios these interactions are efficient and the students thrive on them, the sudden reduction in these despite efforts, have not been taken well. The basic student- faculty interactions are what initial design ideas thrive on. Doubt solving sessions received a varying response where most of them were neutral. Many students also believe that amidst an online session while doubt solving mechanism does face issues like those of inaudibility or even time constraints, the fact that one gets to hear doubts from a collective crowd, facilitates the understanding.

Beyond the work life, peers become an integral part of a designer's journey. There is sharing of ideas, shortcomings and successes. The synergy is incomparable. When this is no longer existing, this blemish has become unconcealable. The scope of constructive and spontaneous peer feedback is lost. The adaptability amidst a diverse classroom that further helps in accepting different thinking ideologies has seemed to suffer for many. The healthy competition which is a motivating factor remained intact as production of work at individual level did not stop but this remained subjective.

Keeping up with the family

The booming social life has suddenly reduced to the family members. Thus, this adds to another factor that must be studied and analysed to get a better outlook. Every individual has undergone alteration economically and emotionally.



As remarked by 40% student's, economic stability reduced however, the family relations have bloomed like never before. Emotional stability had varying trends with a majority of 43.3% of respondents having an improvement while 36.6% have marked it as degraded or highly degraded. It was observed that after getting preoccupied with work the family time got affected. Amidst all the physical and

mental turmoil that each family member might be undergoing equations got unbalanced for many students, adding to their own mental distress.

Accommodation of working patterns by family members was not an issue for 90% of them. Undeniable facts like extensive working hours and elaborate projects is a reality that designers themselves take time to digest and thus, when family members are exposed to this, issues are bound to occur.

Break in the dark clouds

The phase of adaptation still continues while hope of normalcy stays. Amidst a variant target 46.4% of them agree to the fact that they have adapted to the idea of online learning. Positive aspects must be looked at as they will help us grow while remote learning continues to be a reality for all. The freedom of being able to look and refer to peer work as and when needed was appreciated by a majority. As designers, we learn and get inspired. The process of compiling work virtually increases its life span which was usually disregarded while the world was a studio. The chances of physical damage are instantly backed up.

“The idea of concept board wins over display in college studios as there is no limit of space and we can revisit work whenever needed.” remarks one respondent.

Online learning brought a transparent review system. Everyone can attend reviews and thus, this expands one’s learning.

Conclusion

It wouldn’t be wrong to say that the humans’ habitat has transformed. Surprisingly none of it is in our hands this time. Everyone is learning to adapt. The alteration is inevitable.

The virus has metamorphosed not just the fact that we are bound to our homes but it has made us internalise that we are a patchwork of emotions, thoughts and our surroundings. None of the things we face are unidimensional. The sudden changes have not been taken well by majority of us. But a state of denial will only worsen it.

We all are separated by distances but united by one single community we believe in and that is design. The axioms of design education are amidst a trial over a screen. While our ideas unite us, we must make sure that the adversities on a virtual level do not bring in gaps. Each of us must try to evolve on an individual level in order to prosper as a community. While the technicalities cannot be ignored, an effective collaboration is the need of the hour. The circumstantial offerings are uncertain. We need to adapt without compromising on our efforts.

As designers we will always embrace the ‘problems’ so be it for this one too. It would be too soon to simply conclude that online education for design is full of loopholes. I agree to an indisputable fact that both teachers and students are making ends meet. There is extra effort and contribution. It would be misleading to say that online design

education can completely replace the studios. The fact remains that the synergy and other soft skills suffer over a cable connection but in this unprecedented situation all we can strive for is to make the experience better. So, while we work amidst constraints set by nature this time, as a community, the dramatically unpredictable period can be survived. Moreover, venturing in the virtual world today, adds to the scope of design learning over a screen in the future.