

Why Indian students prefer You Tube to Textbooks

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The viva-voce question related to the working of a particular equipment being used by the student to carry out the experiment in the laboratory. The student, very confidently gave a detailed answer which was completely wrong in that it defied basic principles of physics. I was a bit perplexed since an answer like this is unlikely to be based simply on the student's understanding but had to be from some book. And so I asked him which book has this explanation. After some hesitation, he sheepishly let it be known that it was from a You Tube video.

As I later discovered, this was not an isolated case- most students were now relying on You Tube instead of books for learning. And since there is no reason to believe that the sample of students in a large homogenous university like Delhi University, which caters to students from all over the country, are somehow unique, one can possibly argue that this same trend is found among students in other places too.

Interestingly, this is a fairly recent phenomenon. A few years ago, most students would use books as their primary source of information. But now, it seems that the default source of knowledge is You Tube. So what could possibly have changed in the last few years?

I don't think we can know the answer for certain but there are certain plausible hypotheses which one could consider. For one, Covid forced most education to move online. Of course this was disastrous as far as learning was concerned for various reasons; differential access to smartphones or laptops as well as internet bandwidth was one. To be effective, online pedagogical methods need to be substantially different from chalk-and-talk teaching. And we teachers were simply not prepared for it.

Ultimately, most students did manage to get access to a smartphone simply because online instruction went on for almost 2 years. The other enabling factor was the

disruption in the cost of data because of a new entrant in the mobile telephone space. And since video needs high bandwidth, affordable data facilitated this transition.

This is only part of the story. What we still need to understand is why the students have not gone back to books now that online instruction has been replaced by regular teaching? The high price of books is certainly not the reason since most students had anyway stopped buying hard copies of books a while ago. For the tenacious surfer, any book is available to download free of cost on the Internet. However, consulting the soft copies on their phones or laptops is also not very prevalent among students.

One of the reasons is the change of attitudes of the current generation of students. This Instagram generation spends a large fraction of their time viewing reels on their phones. The attention span by default is limited to a few minutes. Reading, at best, is limited to posts of a few lines.

Given this preference for the visual media, one can ask why is it that the students are not going in for excellent online courses but instead opting for You Tube videos put out by amateurs. After all, several universities in the West have put their courses online and these are of excellent quality as well as free to download. In addition, NPTEL offers some very good courses which are again free of cost.

The problem is two-fold- one, the lectures offered by universities as well as those on NPTEL are usually intimidating for many of the students. This is simply because these lectures assume a basic understanding and prior knowledge of the subject which most students feel they lack. The courses are also rigorous and demanding of their time and attention which they are reluctant to put in.

There is also the issue of language. This is true not just for students who have not had their education in English, but also for those who might have been taught in English. This is because comprehension of spoken English is challenging for many of the students. These students find it hard to fully understand even an offline lecture delivered in English. However, in that case, the teacher can typically explain using the vernacular so that at least the essential concept gets through. This is obviously not an option with online lectures.

On You Tube, you will be able to find videos, which, if not in the vernacular, are typically delivered bilingually and in a non-intimidating manner. The students

obviously feel comfortable with the format of short videos which they think give them the essence of the topic. And given the popularity of such videos, the search algorithm throws them up as top results in any search which makes them more popular thus increasing their algorithmic ranking even further.

I tried to explain to the student taking the viva why he should use books rather than unverified content on You Tube and he listened patiently. But from his manner it was clear that I was wasting my time. What this paucity of sustained attention, capacity to concentrate and low reading skills holds for our future, only time will tell. Maybe, the Twitter/Insta generation may not need these as tools like Chat-GPT might be enough.

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