

STRESS MANAGEMENT IN THE POST-GRADUATE CLASSROOM DURING COVID PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

This is a one and half year study of classrooms of two post-graduate courses in a research institute. The two cases which are presented here concern conscious efforts taken to provide psychological support to students, faculty and staff and maintain students' interest and motivation in the course during COVID pandemic. Overcoming the challenges of online education and stressful environment, the courses were run fruitfully. The support by the research institute was also valuable. This study is important as it shows a holistic perspective towards structured education in the classroom and its impact. This case study includes in-depth study of different aspects of the classroom environment such as academic planning and rigour, interrelationships among faculty, students and office staff, support structures, working style, ambiance in the class, communication patterns and coping styles encouraged that helped students and faculty members to manage their stress. Recommendations suggest a strong positive relationship between faculty and students as well as among students as well to manage stress and maintain academic rigour.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, education, motivation, stress management

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Introduction and Literature Review:

Since the beginning of the year 2020, the entire world is facing COVID-19 pandemic, which has turned our lives completely. Since last year the world is trying to be back on its feet with “new-normal” attitude. Even though all the countries are trying to get back to this new-normal life, the impact of this pandemic on our lives is going to be there for long period. Individuals have suffered and are still suffering through several calamities like environmental, financial, social, physical, medical, and psychological. Educational field is no exception to it.

The impact the stress and coping of students who are pursuing higher education is indeed the topic of concern. To control the spread of the infection, in the middle of March 2020, all schools, colleges, universities, and other educational institutes were closed, and new era of online/ distance education was started. This may result in having a serious influence on the careers of students (Niranjan, 2020).

Literature based on students in higher education and pandemic suggests that they faced a lot of stress because of academic, relational, psychological changes (Padrón, I.; Fraga, I.; Vieitez, L.; Montes, C.; Romero, E., 2021). A study held in Belgium, assessing psychological distress among students in higher education post one year of beginning of pandemic revealed concerning results- 50.6% of students presented anxiety symptoms; 55.1% reported symptoms of depression; 20.8% manifested suicidal ideations (Schmits. et. al, 2021). Another study conducted in United States,

assessed the perceived academic risk of college students. Significant proportion of students (one third) reported difficulty coping with COVID-19 related stress. The mean score of perceived stress indicated moderate level of stress. Overall students going through higher education faced different difficulties including concern and worry about own health and health of loved one, difficulty in concentration, irregular sleep patterns, social isolation, adverse effect on social interactions, financial difficulties, and challenges of online classes (Son et al., 2020). A systematic meta-analysis of stress management intervention for college students (Amanvermez et al., 2020) yielded that symptoms and signs of stress and anxiety are common among the college students and efforts towards helping students to cope up with the stress through various interventions have potential to decrease the stress and prevent further mental health related problems.

An article in Indian express revealed results in Lokniti CSDS youth survey, 2021. About 50% youth reported feeling sad, losing interest in daily activities, and being affected by loneliness during the last two or three years and also around 21% reported to have such thoughts, either many times or sometimes in the last two to three years.

Along with students, faculty also faced many challenges. James Knight (2020) writes in his blog that more than 40% of faculty survey respondents reported that they have considered leaving their jobs as a result of COVID-19. An important source of stress was “new modes of teaching” for most of them. Apart from that, support from administration reduced due to work from home, social contact with campus was lost, and simultaneously they had to manage personal life issues, traumas as well.

On the background of these challenges, following research questions were framed.

Research questions:

In this study attempt is made to study the efforts taken collectively by faculty, students, and office staff to manage their mental health. Through this study, the dimension, which is found to be important in research, however ignored most often in educational system is explored in depth, i.e., interrelationships in the class and social-emotional support. The major hurdle was online mode. Therefore, keeping in mind following questions, the classrooms of two courses were studied. To understand the challenges and the strategies used to overcome those was aimed at.

1. What were the challenges before students as well as faculty members in pandemic situation? (Academic planning, administrative difficulties, maintaining rigor, maintaining motivation, handling stress)
2. What strategies were used to deal with those challenges?
3. How was the class ambiance managed in both the courses when online mode was used? (Interrelationships, motivation, belongingness, participatory/ active learning)
4. How classroom contributed to personal stress management of students as well as faculty members? (Coping styles encouraged, social support, institutional support)

Method:

Case -study method was used to understand how multi-layered stress on the background of COVID pandemic was managed and overall well-being restored of the stake holders. The definition offered by Seawright, and Gerring (2008 p. 296) is useful: “the intensive (qualitative or quantitative) analysis of a single unit or a small number of units (the cases), where the researcher’s goal is to understand a larger class of similar units (a population of cases).

Both the authors were part of the team which handled these courses. Outcomes of the courses on different levels were not only witnessed by them but detailed records were kept. To eliminate bias as far as possible a systematic case study was conducted.

Data Collection:

The data consisted of systematic observation records, unstructured interviews of students, faculty members, and office staff. The observations included online sessions as well as a few offline sessions. The final results of the students as well as remarks by external evaluators were also considered. All this data was collected in one and half year from September 2020 to February 2022. The three major waves of COVID pandemic were experienced during this period.

Description of the classrooms observed:

Study of classrooms of two postgraduate courses of two academic years (Year 2020- 21, and 2021-22) is presented here. One course was post-graduate diploma, and the other course was post-master's diploma. Both these were full time one-year diplomas recognized by Savitribai Phule Pune University.

The total strength of post graduate class was 26 in academic year of 2020-21 and 36 in 2021-22 and the medium of instruction was English. The class composed of students from various educational streams like psychology, commerce, education, engineering, management, arts, other humanities etc. The age range of students was from 21 years to 46 years. 60% students were married and had domestic responsibilities. 20 % students were employed or doing another course simultaneously. Around 75% students either themselves or their close relatives suffered from Corona during the course.

The strength of post-master's degree class was 17 in the year 2020-21 and 20 in 2021-

22 and medium of instruction was English. The class composed of students from psychology, education, designing, engineering etc. backgrounds. 85 % students were teachers in schools and 10 % students were teaching at higher education level. 90 % of students were married and had domestic responsibilities. Almost 95% of students were full time employed while doing the course. Almost 80% students or their close relatives suffered from Corona during the course.

Most of the students of both the classes belong to upper middle class.

The challenges faced and strategies applied were almost same for both the classrooms, therefore they are considered together for further discussion.

The challenges faced during the COVID pandemic with respect to running of courses:

There were multi-layered and multidimensional difficulties when the first wave and resultant lock-down was declared. On the practical level, initially there was ambiguity regarding various things. There was no predictability with respect to when the COVID wave and lock-down will end, when and how earlier academic will end, how and when the admission procedure for next academic year will take place, how to do online marketing for the courses, whether offline or online mode will be accepted, how and when to train office staff and professors for online classes. Professors and office staff were not technically competent to conduct online classes. The resource persons needed to be identified to guide and train them. The infrastructure related to online classes had to be built. There were financial concerns as well.

On academic level, the basic material for online teaching was there like PPTs and videos. But for evaluation, the modified versions were needed. Both the courses needed a lot of referencing however, the physical library was not accessible to students as per government guidelines. There were many deliberations on how to maintain academic rigor and how to ensure online and psychological presence of students.

The emotional challenges: were the gravest of all. There was extreme fear, uncertainty, and distress all over in the surrounding environment. Both the courses were run as per annual plan prepared at the start of the academic year.

However, in the pandemic circumstances, it was very difficult to plan things or there had very short-term planning could be done. It was very distressing for the faculty as well as coordinators of the courses to remain flexible throughout the year and continuously keep changing the decisions. Faculty members as well as office staff were also struggling with infections, and hospitalizations of self and nears and dears. Throughout the year, providing the emotional support to students in need was also a challenge. The faculty were suddenly bombarded with lots of online information and were fatigued due to multiple roles related to working from home.

The uniqueness of these courses otherwise conducted was in the high level of motivation, curiosity and positive perspective built in students. It was mainly done through encouraging interaction and developed relationships with faculty members, various experts in the field and the extensive practical work. There was a hurdle in this due to online mode. The development of knowledge-skills-attitude among students was a true challenge.

The strategies used to meet those challenges:

The strategies can be divided into two types, one is solution-focused and the other is emotion-focused.

Solution focused strategies included identifying experts for online teaching setup, training of faculty members and office staff for various different online platforms. After trying various teaching platforms, one online teaching platform was selected by discussing advantages, limitations in the team. The institute also readily provided entire infrastructure needed. Reassignment of work had to be done. Webinars, videos were used for online marketing.

The system for attendance, evaluation, day-to-day functioning was set. Educational e- material, scanned copies of some syllabus points were provided.

Academic rigour:

The academic rigor in both the courses could be maintained to around 80 % for practical work and to full extent for theory lectures during the pandemic. There were limitations for doing practical work in other schools, however rigorous online practical assignments were conducted, though less in number than usual, but students got the exposure. Each practical was undertaken in group and peer feedback method was used.

The theory lectures were restricted to three hours each day as the mode was online. It was supported by homework containing either hands on experience or analysing one's own past experiences. Around 25% of syllabus of both the courses was covered through homework assignments with faculty's feedback. As the courses were related to Psychology subject, faculty made every attempt to connect it to everyday life as well as to the situation around, which automatically helped students to get insight into their own thinking pattern. The students were given idea regarding probable impact of COVID pandemic on children and the role they need to play as professionals after they complete the course. That motivated them to take their courses seriously.

Many students from earlier batch were active front-line workers in COVID situation. Their stories, experiences encouraged current batches and underlined the importance of what they are learning. They developed insight about how and what all they can do and how much does it make difference in lives of others.

Career opportunities, even if the pandemic condition continues, what all the students can do on their own, were made clear to them, which helped to reduce uncertainty regarding their career opportunities. Students were also encouraged to pursue higher education in the subject.

The academic planning throughout the year was kept flexible. The assignment submission deadlines were not kept stringent, but instead students were encouraged and motivated to submit the assignments in time. Many of the assignments were given in groups and group study was encouraged. Throughout the year, every activity was conveyed

to the students well in advance, thereby making their academic life predictable, in turn reducing their stress.

Ambiance in the online classroom:

Interrelationships: Right from the day one, conscious efforts were made by faculty to call students by their first names, thereby increasing familiarity and belongingness. One to one dialogue with each student was maintained by course coordinators and students were encouraged to share their not only academic difficulties but their personal and familial issues as well. They were given guidance to manage the hectic schedules, studies, familial responsibilities, and health concerns in the families. Extremely informal and emotionally comfortable environment was provided in the institute and the most important thing was encouragement for two-way communication. A deep feeling of trust was built-up among students and faculty members.

Networking among students was encouraged. For that, opportunities for few offline lectures in between COVID waves were used. Many group activities and assignments were planned and executed. Initially twice, when need was expressed by any specific student, faculty appealed to other students for help. But gradually mediating role of faculty ended, and students built deep bond among themselves. In one of the semester end exams, around 40% students along with their family members were down with fever, but one of their batchmates took the lead and motivated all of them to give the exam. Everyone responded to her efforts. Many students faced difficulties in adjusting to online mode. Batchmates provided them the necessary support. Devices were shared, training was also provided, sometimes to the faculty as well. Though the informal interaction was encouraged, the passion of and discipline followed by faculty members as well as office staff made students also follow the same. Efforts taken to minimize the effect of pandemic by all the team was evident to students which acted as source of belongingness and motivation.

Emotional tone of classes: Throughout the year, positive, accepting, responsive and cooperative tone was maintained in and out of the class. Consciously effort was made to give personal touches to the interaction maintaining required confidentiality at times. When any student faced any kind of medical emergency, everyday communication was maintained either through what's-app, or through mail or through telephonic calls. The classroom was considered as an important support system in students' lives. Unpredictability in the class was kept minimum so that it would not add to stress levels.

Coping styles encouraged: Distress and pain of each other was acknowledged. Still rational ways of dealing with those were taught and encouraged to be used. Everybody believed that this stage would also pass and was ready to face current challenges with growth mindset.

Outcome of the courses:

All the students from last year batches successfully completed the course. Some have resumed their previous jobs with new vision, seven students got a good employment in pandemic period and 16 students are pursuing higher education in psychology. Almost all students admitted that their respective courses changed their perspective towards their life as well as towards the world.

To sum up:

In the worldwide disaster of COVID pandemic, the factors true, basic to sustenance of human existence emerged in this micro system of classrooms of educational courses.

Ultimately, what contributes to human well-being? Purpose in life and meaningful relationships. That was achieved through these classrooms.

However, more in-depth study is needed in this regard.

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Cite This Article:

***Ms. Dhanashree Sowani & **Ms. Isha Kanhere, (2022).** *Stress Management in the Post-Graduate Classroom during Covid Pandemic, Aarhat Multidisciplinary International Education Research Journal, XI (III) May – June, 165-170.*