



## Editorial

# Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic for virtual academic activities

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The global COVID-19 pandemic has given us an opportunity to introspect. While it has also thrown up challenges that no one anticipated, it has also given birth to innovative solutions. One aspect is how face to face has been replaced with virtual. It is well known that virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, and JioMeet have become household names. They have become saviors for all ages and all circumstances. Be it the primary school students, the corporate sales force or the law professionals, most of the stake holders have adapted to technology – eagerly or reluctantly. Transition to telemedicine too has somewhat bridged the gap for in-office visits, but there is a continuing challenge of delays and decline of new diagnoses due to the pandemic and patient discomfort to approach their physicians over digital consultations

As far as primary school students are concerned, lack of suitable hardware (laptop, tablet, and smartphone) or requirement for numerous devices per household to be shared by “working from home” parents and their kids, and internet connectivity (bandwidth, consistency, and frequent disconnection) have been some of the major challenges. Easy distractions (there have been several photographs doing the rounds on social media where students have been photographed fast asleep or playing games instead of concentrating on what the teacher is saying) as well as compromised attention span and comprehensibility issues have also been affecting effective online learning. This goes on to say a lot about the fact that in-person interactions between teachers, students, and other stakeholders cannot be completely replaced by virtual classrooms. Performance evaluation of students in the virtual world has its own sets of challenges with aberrant scores raising suspicions of parents undertaking exams or help from online resources.

Postgraduate medical students have somewhat overcome these glitches to a great extent. Hence, it is important to understand from these students themselves as to what works and what does not in the virtual educational world.

We studied with a WhatsApp group Chakravayuh Question Hour for oncology learning. This included 125 members and six group admins (who had just completed their oncology trainings). The purpose was to have group members post their specific academic queries and for senior university teachers to answer them. The group was created on June 11, 2020. Over a 4-month period, a total of 16 difficult oncology cases were discussed and four online surveys were conducted. In addition, announcements of several virtual teaching webinars and lectures were disseminated through the group. The group members were also invited to take the survey about the value of virtual medical teaching programs.

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**Table 1:** Advantages of virtual academic meetings for participants –the four Cs.

S. No.	Description
1.	Convenience – can join the session from the comfort of the home. Can join anytime, can leave anytime, can remain logged in and have food or multitask at the same time without being embarrassed about attire and looks
2.	Cost – no cost of registration, travel, hotel, taxi, food, etc.
3.	Communication – can post queries and comments in the chat box at any time. Do not have to wait for the speaker to conclude or the moderator to acknowledge you at the microphone. No waiting in queue
4.	Camouflage – can login using a pseudo name, pseudo display picture, without video and hence remain anonymous. No need to disclose identity or hesitate before asking silly question

**Table 2:** Audience factors: How audience irritates faculty – the four As.

S. No.	Description
1.	Audio on (not muting themselves) – allowing their local background noise to disturb the proceedings (children shouting, dogs barking, traffic honking, spouse asking something)
2.	Apathy about their video being on – sleeping in bed, walking around aimlessly, device camera pointed towards fan on ceiling, unintentionally showing parts of body/dress at grotesque angles (e.g., man spreading), etc.
3.	Attentiveness (lack of) – asking questions that have already been answered in the lecture or in response to an earlier question
4.	Anonymity – participants asking questions when they have joined without any recognizable display name (it is difficult to answer questions directly to “My iPhone” or “XYZ” or “Galaxy owner”)

Based on this and similar surveys, personal experiences and published literature, we have come to the conclusion that the CAT (C: Convenience, A: Audience factors, and T: Technical/technology factors) is out of the bag [Tables 1-3] and the value of online academic activities varies to a great extent (just like the value of face to face conventional meetings). For the participants, there are distinct advantages of using the virtual platform for academic teaching programs [Table 1].

**Table 3:** Technology and technical considerations: The four Ts that the audience hates in virtual academic programs.

S. No.	Description
1.	Timing of program – the program not sticking to the stated schedule – starting late, overshooting time, pushing the rest of the program back
2.	Tardiness of the faculty – the faculty not attired in professional dress or at least in smart casuals, having improper lighting so that faculty’s face cannot be seen well, distracting background, not being to share screen (slides), not having checked audio/video in advance, joining late, being in a place with insufficient/unstable internet connection, getting distracted by others in his room, casually answering phones or not keeping phone on mute during the session. Asking the moderator to repeat the question (being distracted and not paying attention). Logging off before the session is completed
3.	Topic of the session – faculty not sticking to the topic given by the organizers, not being familiar with own slides, using wrong slide format, going back and forth, wandering off at a tangent, skipping slides, saying that time is not sufficient for the topic assigned
4.	Technical glitches – program organizers and event managers not following a checklist and/or not following to the SOP. Difficulty in login, unmuting, screen sharing, PowerPoint slide control, etc.

Looking at the other side of the coin is equally important. There are some audience factors that are also irritating to the faculty. They are shown in Table 2.

What the audience is irritated by or hates in virtual programs is shown in Table 3.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unexpected challenges and unique solutions. The transition to the virtual teaching platform is no different. As our experience increases, we have come across an entire spectrum of distinct advantages and disadvantages. Deep introspection is vital to enhance the viability and usability of this virtual learning tool and we believe the points discussed in the table will encourage further discussions in this regard.

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